

**WHEN I GET HOME: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES AND  
ACCOMPANYING CRITICAL COMMENTARY**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....p.3

Acknowledgements.....p.4

Introduction.....p.5

Part 1: *When I Get Home*

‘To Basra’.....p.7

‘The New Girl.....p.14

‘The Bunker’ .....p.18

‘Significant Objects In My Grandmother’s Life’ .....p.24

‘What He Doesn’t Tell Her’ .....p.27

‘The War Tour’ .....p.32

‘Fishfinger’ ..... p.42

‘Lad Lazarus’ .....p.46

‘Down Duchy Road’ .....p.54

‘Lebensborn’ .....p.60

‘Their Last Holiday’ .....p.78

‘Thermal Vest’ .....p.85

‘A Biography of Mrs Charlotte Manning’ .....p.89

‘33 Bullets’ .....p.97

Part 2: Critical Commentary

Section 1: Short Story Theory: The Quest for Definition.....p.107

Section 2: Short Story Theory and *When I Get Home*.....p.127

Section 3: Ethics and Voice Appropriation.....p.136

Section 3: The Home and Women’s Writing.....p.152

Section 5: The Home in War Fiction.....p.164

Section 6: Writing the Self: Childhood and Home.....p.189

Section 7: Collections of Stories: Form and Connections in *When I Get Home*.....p.204

Conclusion: Form and Politics in *When I Get Home*.....p.209

Bibliography.....p.213

## ABSTRACT

The collection of stories *When I Get Home* explores the loss of home and the effects of war and persecution on migrants and refugees, as well as children's capacity for cruelty and one's own potential for violence. The short stories blend elements of the modern lyric story, horror, metafiction, travel narrative and more fragmented postmodern forms.

In the critical commentary I situate the collection within contemporary short fiction and short story theory, drawing on the theory of the modern lyrical story by Eileen Baldeshwiler as well as theories of postmodern short fiction. While critical theory tends to prefer the experimental story over the traditional, I argue that the postmodern form is not necessarily more progressive than traditional forms. Instead, I contend that each story produces its own politics in the act of writing. I broach the ethics of voice appropriation when writing about characters from different ethnic backgrounds and ask how an ethical practice might be possible. I relate my representation of the home to the cultural and literary debates around women's writing and the domestic, and defend the domestic as an important literary starting point. I contest the ongoing separation of the private and public spheres in the cultural evaluation of women's writing by demonstrating how I have placed the home at the centre of my stories about war and persecution. I situate my approach within war literature and analyse how the home is represented in war fiction by men and women writers.

I consider how memory and imagination have played a complex role in my stories about childhood. I analyse the gap between the speaking, narrating self and the seeing, narrated childhood self in the story and argue that this gap is used by short story writers to interrogate the practice of writing the self. Finally, I take into consideration the form of the short story collection and contend that stories should be read in relation to other stories in a collection and not as single texts. Throughout the commentary I emphasise the process of writing and drafting of the stories rather than focusing on the finished text, and in so doing, I demonstrate that when writing there is no preconceived ideology between form and content; politics is written anew with each story.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first part of this thesis is my collection of stories *When I Get Home*. The stories explore the loss of home and the effects of war and persecution on migrants and refugees in different historical and cultural circumstances, from the effects of the Lebensborn program on a Norwegian woman to the oppression of a Kurdish academic. One's own capacity for cruelty and violence is explored in stories about childhood and alternative reality. These stories blend elements of the modern lyric story, horror, metafiction, travel narrative and more fragmented postmodern forms.

In the second part of this thesis I will situate my short fiction within contemporary writing and short story theory. In particular, I will look at Baldeswiler's notion of the 'epical' and 'lyrical' short story, and go on to analyse the fragmentation and self-reflexivity of more recent writing. I will counter the essentialising definitions of some short story theories, and attempt a more open approach by drawing on the views of Frank O'Connor and Nadine Gordimer. While literary theory generally sees the postmodern short story as being more progressive than traditional forms, I will propose that no writing technique is in itself progressive and political. Rather the specifics of the text's narrative strategies and the cultural circumstances of the production of the text determine its politics. I will then broach the ethics of voice appropriation when writing about characters from different cultural backgrounds, and attempt to find an ethical practice.

I will relate my representation of the home to the cultural and literary debates around women's writing and the domestic and defend the domestic as an important literary starting point. I will contest the ongoing separation of the private and public spheres in cultural evaluation of women's writing, which Virginia Woolf highlighted in her comment that 'this is an important book, the critics assume because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of a woman in a drawing room'. To do this I will demonstrate how I have placed the home at the centre of my stories about war and persecution. I will situate my approach within war literature and analyse how the home is represented in war fiction by men and women writers. I will subsequently discuss issues of writing the self and short stories about childhood, and consider how memory and imagination have played a complex role in my stories about childhood. I will analyse the

gap between the speaking, narrating self in the story and the seeing, narrated childhood self and argue that this gap is used by short story writers to interrogate the practice of writing the self. Finally, I will discuss the interrelationships and links between the stories in *When I Get Home* and contend that analysing a short story without taking its relationship to the other stories in a collection or anthology limits its reading. During the above discussion, I will relate my work to other writers and to critical debates while focusing my discussion on the process of writing and drafting the stories, rather than on the finished text. In doing this, I will demonstrate that when writing there is no preconceived ideology, but politics is written anew with each story.



PART 1:  
*WHEN I GET HOME*<sup>1</sup>  
*A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES*

**To Basra**

It was pissing it down when I got off at the top of Langworthy. I walked down the road with my collar turned up and my hat over my ears. I was hoping mam had set the table and they'd be there, like at Christmas: Mam sulking over the washing up and calling 'Dinner, our Wendy!' But Wendy would be smoking out back, whilst dad tinkered with his model ships and ate off his lap.

Hicks, a private from our unit had a welcome home party, even though he'd only done the training. His family decked the house with banners and picnic tables, like an old war film. We never heard the end of it.

I hitched up my rucksack and turned down our road. It was dead quiet. No kids playing or alarms going or anything. You'd think the houses were empty. A few had been boarded up with metal windows like they were armoured. But our house was like Kew fucking Gardens, the way mam had been stuffing roses and hydrangeas into our two-foot yard.

I'd only been away eight months for training and then it was straight on tour. It felt like years. I didn't want to go home, not after what went on. But I'm no wuss, so I dodged the flowers and opened the door.

Mam, dad and Wendy were on the sofa, watching the telly. Their faces were a picture. 'Philip. Look at you!' mam said, her face beaming. 'Hasn't he lost weight, Wendy?' Our kid grunted from her phone. I knew what was coming, so I said, 'I'll put my bag away,' and made for the stairs.

'Are you on leave then? Why didn't you tell us?' Mam called. I flopped on my bed. I didn't have much to unpack because I'd left the uniform at the base. Anyway, wearing the camouflage felt like fancy dress. I still hated wearing the boots; they were like little armoured vehicles on my feet. I stretched out on the bed and my boots knocked the end, so I yanked them off and threw them on the floor. 'Philip?' mam called. 'What you doing up

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<sup>1</sup> John Lennon, 'When I Get Home', from *A Hard Day's Night* (London: Parlophone, 1964).

there?' I leaned over the bed and picked up an old Marvel comic, then dropped it. My room was like a kid's bedroom now. I grinned at my Adidas boxes. I'd bought three pairs in different colours with my first wage. I got out the blue pair and held them up. They still smelt new.

I heard mam say, 'Something's not right. I know it. Malcolm, are you listening?'

'Susan. Calm down. Jesus.'

'He's not even in his uniform!'

I put on my trainers and trekked downstairs. 'I'm going out,' I said, slinging on my jacket. In the kitchen, our kid was rustling in the fridge. Mam paused at the living room door. 'Philip, have some tea.'

'Leave it, Susan,' Dad said from the couch.

'I'm on leave.'

'He's just a fecking liar,' Dad said, like I wasn't there. He always spoke like I wasn't there, or I was dead and buried. 'Fecking useless liar.'

I was out of there, striding down the road. I wasn't mithered. It was like that time I'd skived the exams in year eleven and got caught nicking models from the model shop (I sold them to nerdy kids). My mam was called to the station and cried like I'd killed someone. So I didn't do the exams.

*The army will be the making of you, they'd all said. You'll learn some skills (mam). Make him learn some discipline. It'll get his arse out of bed, that's what it'll do (dad). You don't even need any GCSE's to get in. They'll take anyone (our kid).*

But then I'd gone on the website and it didn't seem that bad. Good pay. Get to see the world. *Think Soldier*. I had a go on the interactive stuff. *What would you do?* When I left for the infantry training centre I was all buoyed up. But 24 weeks was a long time for a P.E. lesson in Scotland.

I'm not daft. I got what they were doing with the training, not trying to break you, but push you till you fought back as a team. Kind of like fighting against them, but doing what they wanted. I clocked this when we were out on exercise with God knows how many kilos on our backs. I dragged behind the others and stopped to get my breath and lean against a tree. A stitch was killing me. I could see them all running up the hill, with their compasses and maps, like boy scouts, shouting, 'come on mate, you're nearly there' to each other. All I wanted was to curl into a ball and fuck them all off. I was angry, like they'd planned. But it didn't make me want to fight. I'd rather sit back, skin up and let



them get on with it. I didn't, mind. I ran on, and did what I was supposed to, all the way to Iraq. But our team came last in that exercise and we had to do extra laps. Sash and Hicks were pissed off with me then. They've got their own back since.

At the end of our road, I turned right and walked down to the play area, with its swings wound around the bars, pot-holed tarmac and crossed out 'No Dogs' sign. I leant on the railing. I used to hang out here when I couldn't get in The Dog and Partridge. I'd have had a go at getting them swings down, but someone might see me, so I turned back onto Langworthy and walked up to the Height. It was a bit of a walk and still raining, so I hunched up my shoulders and pulled my woolly hat over my ears. John would be there. He liked to start early on a Sunday, and drink as much as he could till he rejoined the hamster wheel. John and I go way back. He had a job for Argos catalogue and was hooked on the gym. He'd been all, 'Soz, but you won't hack it, mate.' So I'd said, 'Why don't *you* join?' and he said, 'I don't need to prove nothing.'

I didn't even make it to Basra. When we were flown in we were taken from Basra airport to a base south of the city. Outside was like the backside of hell, all craggy desert and blistering heat. We were staring at the floor, under the thin, green light. I was on edge, felt like a sitting duck, thinking of all the roadside bombs and IEDs, stuck in that lightly armoured vehicle, waiting to roll over one and boom. It was hot in there, no air conditioning. I swayed back and forth, the lads' heads looming in my face, feeling like I was being strangled and gagging. I undid my helmet and puked in it, all orangey and bits of carrot. The others moaned, 'Fucking hell Phil, get out of here.' I could hear a couple of them retching. My head swam and I had to hold my helmet of sick till the base, trying not to spill it. I never heard the end of it. I was 'Puker' after that.

*Puker. You puked yet, Phil? Time for a nap is it, Puker? A little lie down? Call yourself a soldier?*

I trudged past the shops up Bolton Road. I didn't need to march now. I could dawdle if I liked, even if all there was to see were hairdressers and florists. After the shooting last year, they were trying to smarten up the Dog and Partridge, but it wasn't working. It was the same old shit hole, stinking of piss and stale beer. The ripped pool table and games machine were still there. They needed to get rid of the multicoloured disco lights for starters. The music was blaring inside and the lights flicked around a small empty dance

floor. John was slouched in a corner chair with a pint. I went up and said, 'John. How you doing? What's with the work shirt?'

'It's the look of a manager.' He sat with his elbows resting on the back of the chair. I could see his nipples straining through the material.

'On a Sunday?' I said.

'And where's your kit, mate?'

'I'm not walking round looking like a squaddie. Not round here.'

'Wimped out more like.' He laughed and took a swig.

I breathed in. It was hot in here, suffocating. 'You alright for a drink?'

'Yeah. Got this mate.'

I got a pint and went out back for a smoke. I needed a minute. It was only six o'clock and our mates were coming. There'd be a whole night of drinking. Out there it was like someone's back yard with cheap metal tables and a B & Q awning. I sat down with my pint, rolled up and watched the rain drip off the edge.

This lad came out. How he got served, I don't know. I swear down, he was the spitting image of me when I was sixteen. He was all track suit bottoms and long greasy hair, like he couldn't decide whether he wanted to be a scally or a hippie. He lit up and sipped from his beer like he was the queen with a tea cup. The barman came out, cleared some glasses. 'You'alright Jed?' He said to the lad.

'Not bad,' the lad said.

I was chilling out, smoking, when some twat grabbed my shoulder. 'Oy Phil. You back? What you doing here?'

I turned round in my chair. It was Bez from school. He'd grown his hair, like the Gallaghers. I didn't say anything. He stepped nearer. 'Know what I heard? I heard you're a killer.'

'Easy mate,' I said.

He leaned over and took a swing at me, but I jumped out of the chair. He was glowering. I wasn't getting riled with that shit. 'Soz,' I said. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'

I backed away, wondering how I'd get my pint back. It was still on the table, behind him. He was edging nearer like some boxer. He took another swing, but I ducked. The army was good for some things.

'Fucking killer,' he snarled again.



I backed my way round a table and caught the eye of the bar man. 'I don't know what his problem is,' I said. The bar man stood there and said to Bez, 'You're leaving.'

Bez held up his arms, like he was innocent, then he shrugged his collar up and sauntered inside. I finished my pint. The young lad, Jed, was still there, looking around him.

I wondered about getting out of there, bypassing my mates, that fucker, and going somewhere that wasn't home. There was no explaining, no telling them what had happened. None of them. So I got a chair, stepped on it and jumped over the wall into the entry. Jed jumped down behind me, stumbling.

'What do you want?' I said.

'Where you off to?'

'Nowhere.'

I walked down the entry and peered round the corner. The kid was behind me. 'Are you a squaddie?' he said.

'No,' I said.

'Yeah, you are.'

I could see Bez at the end of the road with two others, so I walked to the other end of the entry. He followed me. At King's Road I stopped for a fag, and he goes, 'Tell us then, tell us what it was like.'

'It wasn't like anything.'

Then I looked right and left, like a good kid crossing the road and went down past the library.

The little git was still tagging behind me, so I said, 'I used to have that jacket.'

'Did you?'

You could tell he was impressed. 'Yeah,' I said. 'But I wouldn't be caught dead in it now.'

That shut him up. I'd go to Light Oaks Park. See if there were any ducks left.

'We going to the park?' he asked.

I gave him a look.

'Want a can?' He pulled out a Heineken from his jacket and another for himself.

'Go on,' he said. 'It's not poisoned.'

I took the can and walked off down the road with it. Some old witch was peering from behind her curtains from her posh windows - so I gave her the finger and took a swig of the beer.

Jed caught up with me, holding his can. I got through the park gates and I could breathe better. We went down the path, past the tennis courts and towards the pond.

‘So you gonna tell me or what?’ Jed said.

I gave him a look as I squeezed through the bushes. But it felt weird, like I was doing reconnaissance moves, and spying on the ducks, so I said, ‘Sack this,’ and headed to the playground. It wasn’t like play area down Langworthy, all the swings were in action and it had been refurbished. There was a climbing frame and spongy tarmac, and a big roundabout with bars you could balance on. There was no one around so I’d have a go.

‘Where do you live?’ I asked.

‘Down Duchy Road.’

‘War zone.’

‘So did you get a medal?’

‘Nah.’

‘Why not?’

I put my can on the ground and jumped on the roundabout. Pushing myself on my right foot, I perched on the bar as I span. I was fucked. I had the court martial hearing next week. They had me down for not following orders and behaviour ‘not becoming’ of a soldier. I wasn’t going back, whatever happened, so they could have me down for desertion if they wanted.

I stopped with my foot and said, ‘I was a right coward.’ Then span myself again. As it slowed he jumped on. ‘Go on, tell me,’ he said.

‘Alright,’ I said. ‘What we mostly did was go on patrol and search houses. This one was a “search and detain op”. You know like, if someone came round your mam’s gaff and looked in all the cupboards, throwing shit everywhere...’

‘My mam’s dead.’

‘OK. Soz mate...anyway that was our job. We were on a “search and detain op” in Garmat Ali. We had to go on them because they hid themselves in the houses and put guns in kids’ beds. We went from the base in a Warrior to the area and we stormed into some kind of living room. There were four women with children, sat on the floor. They started



screaming and we circled them, round the room. There was nothing in it. Nothing to search.

“Puker and Sash, you go through and search the other areas,” the corporal said. But one of the women was crying and grabbed my leg, saying something, I don’t know what. I just stood there. I couldn’t do it. None of it. So he starts laying into me.

Then the three of them go in the other room and I’m left there with the crying women. Then I hear shooting and I run through. The room leads to a courtyard and I see one of them lying on the ground. ...I raise my gun but I can’t do it. I can’t shoot or anything, like a fucking coward I just stand there. My fingers won’t work, my legs won’t work. The corporal shouts something to me, but I can’t do anything. I’m supposed to fight and shoot and all that, but I can’t. Something hits me in the leg. I fall and crawl into a corner and then another team stormed through the house. They must have heard the shots.’

‘Did they all die?’

‘Two did. And the other two, Sash and Hicks. Testified against me.’

‘Fuckers.’

I looked at my hands gripping the bar.

‘You shouldn’t listen to them,’ he said.

I was pushing us round at a nice, pensioner pace. ‘The fuckers!’ I yelled. I whizzed up and span us fast and we whooped and whooped, gasping and dizzy, until the world around us was a blur.

## **The New Girl**

When the new girl comes blow impossibly large bubbles from the staircase, then spit your bubblegum into a flowerpot. Dig the toe of your shoe into the hole in the carpet and watch her standing at the door, with her rucksack and short denim jacket. Call her (the new girl), 'New Girl' and when your mother yanks your elbow, pull away and say 'Up Yours'. She will whisper in your ear, 'Her name is Sandra. You'll be fostered, you little madam.'

Sing: 'I should be so lucky.'

Peer in the new girl's bags while your mother shows her the house and your father tells her about the park and how we go to the museum on Saturdays, church on Sundays. See that all her clothes are dirty and that her knickers are worn and dirty. Think about your mother's knickers that soak in bowls and the pink ones you wanted but weren't allowed. Try to be helpful, so take her bag to her bedroom and put all her clothes in a bowl with hot water and soap. When she comes looking for her bag, act proud as she stares at the bowl. Stir the clothes with a spoon as if you are cooking them and ask about her mother. She will refuse to answer and pretend you are not there, so stand in front of her and say loudly, 'What's your problem?' She will look scared so think about pinching her arm, but then flop onto her bed. Your mother will come in to check. She will say, 'Geraldine, what's this?' in her warning voice. So sit up and say, 'I'm just being helpful...'

Years later you will visit your mother for Sunday lunch – you will try to avoid it as much as possible. You will wander the house and stare in the foster children's old room. It still looks ready for a new child. The bed is made with cushions and teddies, the drawers are empty and waiting. You will sit on the bed and remember wanting to pinch the new girl and how satisfactory it would be. And then your memory will falter. Maybe you did pinch her. Hard. On her upper arm where the bruise would not show. You will leave the room. Unsure.

Anyway, spend the next few days making eyes at the new girl over the dinner table while she gets served first. She will poke her chicken or pasta and watch her plate as if it is the TV, but eat little. Your mother will ask her what food she likes, but the new girl will just shrug her shoulders.



Fold your arms and stick out your lip when your mother says, 'Geraldine, I'm getting tired of your attitude.' Roll your eyes when she says you should feel sorry for Sandra (i.e. the new girl). Reply: 'I have done my best to make her feel like a welcome and valued member of the family.'

You are ace at mimicking your mother.

At school ignore her, the new girl. Excel in the subjects you like (drama), sit listlessly in the ones you don't (everything else). In chemistry make a questionnaire for the new girl. That evening tell her every foster kid has to fill it in. She will look dubiously at the squiggles in pink and purple felt tip.

Say: 'Let's fill it in together.'

She will answer 'What's your favourite chocolate?' with 'Bounty bar'. 'Why have you been fostered?' She will leave blank.

Ask her repeatedly about her life, her family and why they don't want her. Then say, 'Don't worry, my mum doesn't want me either.' Suggest you run away together. Perhaps Paris. Sing 'I love Paris in the springtime,' in your best vibrato, but she won't know the song. She will say, 'I've been to Majorca.' Do one of your sighs and say if she lasts till August it's camping in Wales. So how about the Eiffel Tower? You could jump on the back of a truck. Cruise underneath to Paris. She won't be sure if you're serious. She will mumble she gets travel sick. Point to the question, 'What is your most embarrassing moment?' She will slowly say that she once pooped herself in PE. She had the runs but could not stay home because her dad was there. Widen your eyes and say, 'The last girl wet the bed every night but tried to pretend she hadn't. The room stank.'

She will ask 'Do you have a lot of kids?'

Say, 'Mil-li-ons. They come and go. One slashed the settee. Another let the cat eat the hamster.' Say savagely: 'I'm sick of it all. Not you though. You're ok.' Smile and say her black nail polish is dead nice.

Show her the question: 'Can you shop lift?' And suggest she steals some Maltesers from the shop for you. She will say she has never done it. Say, 'First time for everything dear. We all have to grow up sometime,' in your mother's voice. Stare at her squarely. Think she is so white she is see through, like an old shirt on a clothes line. Wonder if she really exists. Perhaps she is a ghost, murdered by her mother or a foster mother. Think if you were dead you would so haunt your mother. Look at her thin arms. She has the smallest wrists in the world. Between her red, flaky lipsticked lips, her teeth are yellow and

bad. Tell her to brush them morning and night. She will turn and sneer, 'Mind your own business.' Shrug your shoulders and locomotion your way out of the room.

Stand outside your parent's room and listen to them talking about the new girl. Try to make out words like jail sentence, father. Hear them getting out of bed so creep away, pantomime fashion.

Decide what you hate.

1. Your mother. She only fosters for the money. None of it comes your way. The lining of your coat is ripped, your shoes are scuffed. Mimic, 'Have you polished your shoes Geraldine? Pull that skirt down Geraldine.' And she called you Geraldine.

2. Your maths teacher. He chews mints, but his breath over your shoulder is like a pond.

3. Think maybe you don't hate the new girl.

Show her how to roll up her school skirt. Paint your nails black with her polish. Wave your fingers at hers. Say, 'Look. We are the same.' The new girl will hiss, 'Don't touch my stuff.'

Say, 'Sorr-y.' But sit in your room in a huff. Wish you had a real sister. Ask your mother how long she is staying. Your mother will say it depends on her family situation. Ask innocently, 'What situation?'

She will say, 'Never you mind.'

Wonder what Sandra listens to on her Walkman when she is lying on her bed with her arms crossed like a dead person, what she is thinking, staring resolutely upwards; how she manages to stay so still.

Then one day you find her packing. Ask: Where are you going? She will shrug, as if it doesn't matter. Run to your parents' room and demand that the new girl stays. Your mother will say, 'Geraldine. She's not supposed to stay here forever.' Shout: 'This is not a hotel!' These are your mother's words, used when you stomp in from school without speaking. But she is the one who treats your home like a hotel. So hide in your room, refusing to come out until the new girl has gone. Play music loud on your headphones, lie on your bed, pick off the black polish and chew your cuticles till they bleed. Later, when she has gone and her room is ready for the next child, regret you didn't say goodbye.



When you go to your mother's for that Sunday lunch, and you are sitting at the dinner table, you will ask your mother what happened to Sandra with the black nail polish. She will say absently, 'She was moved to another area because of her father. She was fostered till she was sixteen. I heard she got married young. Has kids now.' You won't be married. Be glad you're not. Your mother, who will be serving up the roast, with bowls of carrots and parsnips, and her new find - butternut squash - will stop serving and wave the spoon at you. She will say in a voice you don't recognise, 'You were a bully. I stopped fostering because of the way you were.'

Walk out of the dining room and stare at your mother's kitchen as if you have never seen it before. Go back in and say, 'Why was I not enough?' Then slam out of the house like a teenager and mutter to the garden, 'I was her friend.' March down the road and into the first shop you see and think about buying something, anything. But it's the old newsagent's and the choice is milk or bags of broken biscuits. Choose the biscuits

## The Bunker

‘Think I’ll check the bunker today.’

‘Granddad,’ I said. ‘I’ll have a look. How you going to get down them step ladders?’

Granddad was in his chair next to the window, so he had a view of the back garden and the shed.

‘Where’s my paper?’ he said.

I placed *The Daily Express* on his knee. ‘Riots,’ he read. ‘In London and Birmingham. 200 dead.’ He squinted at the page. ‘You’d think they’d get the message and go home, wouldn’t you. Instead of killing people.’

‘Here you are,’ I said and gave him his brew.

‘There’s none of them hiding in my bunker, is there?’ He laughed and then coughed. His tea spilt on his hand. I wiped it with a tissue. ‘I’ll go check the damp for you then.’

‘Take the bleach.’

In the kitchen, I placed a plastic bag of food and bottle of bleach inside the bucket. He’d watch me in the garden because he had nothing better to do. My trainers sank in the wet grass. It made me feel awkward, so I pulled my sweater over my bum. He liked to go on about my arse.

Our garden had high fences and bushes, but I reckoned the neighbours could still see if they wanted. Most of the neighbours knew about the bunker inside the shed; it had been there since the seventies. I made sure no one saw me entering or exiting. And when I did, I’d have gardening tools, like I was a gardener. I was growing vegetables as a cover, though only some weeds had sprouted.

Anyway, the bunker had always been in my life. I had tea parties in it as a kid. It had chrome and white panels for walls, with secret cupboards for the tins of soup and beans. The chairs were metal and not very comfy, but when you were down there you didn’t mind cause it was like the inside of a spaceship. When I was a little I thought we would just take off when catastrophe came.

I remember granddad patting back and forth in his DIY dungarees, fixing this and that in the bunker, and my mum watching from the kitchen window, as if she was on the



lookout, smoking over the washing up and tipping her ash into a dead bonsai tree on the window sill.

In our house we were waiting for a catastrophe. We'd always known it was coming. The signs were everywhere, granddad would say. It was just a matter of time.

But it didn't come as we thought.

Now, I was back living at home till I got myself on my feet. I had moved in with Jim in Whalley Range, but that hadn't worked. He was a bricklayer and got involved in the riots and lynchings, and then Whalley Range turned nasty so I went home and said if he wanted to lynch kids, he could make his own tea.

Inside the shed I moved the mower and shovel out of the way, then knelt down and tapped on the trapdoor.

'Yasmin,' I called. 'It's me.'

The trapdoor opened upwards and Yasmin's head appeared. 'Get down!' I said. I climbed down the steps behind her. It was musty inside the bunker. Dusty and grimy. 'I'll leave the door open, for air, but you'll have to keep quiet.'

Then the baby began to cry. 'I can't keep the baby quiet, can I?' Yasmin snapped.

I closed the trapdoor. 'I can't stay long. Granddad is watching. The van is coming tonight. Half eleven.'

'Ok.'

I waited. I was expecting at least a thank you, but she jiggled the baby and wiped her nose on her sleeve. Her long black hair was greasy and pulled back in a ponytail. There was baby food down her top. She could at least keep the place tidy. The put-up bed wasn't made and there were piles of cups and plates in the sink. It wasn't like she had much else to do all day.

Yasmin and I were at school together. A month ago I gave her a call to see how she was doing and it turned out that she had a baby. She was living in some flats on Salford precinct and couldn't go out the door. Max, her boyfriend, had been lynched outside a pub and died in the street. So I came and got her in the middle of the night in my mum's Escort. She had to lie down on the seat so no one saw her. I sneaked her and the baby in the bunker.

I placed the baby food and soup on the counter.

'Stay a bit,' she said. 'I can't bear it down here alone.'

'Granddad is waiting. He watched me come down.'

‘I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you told him. He’d remember me.’

‘Nah, he wouldn’t like it.’

‘Can you just open the baby food while I quieten him?’

I opened the glass jar and washed a teaspoon, then came and sat next to her on the bed. ‘Here you are,’ I said. ‘You best do it. I can never get it in his mouth.’

She positioned him on her knee so she could take the spoon. I held the jar while the baby guzzled the food, making little slurps. She caught the dribbles of food on his chin and slipped them into his mouth. He was all gums and baby food goo. ‘He likes this one,’ I said. ‘Apple and banana.’

‘He likes everything. If he was fussy I don’t know what I’d do.’

‘The clothes are in the dryer. They’ll be done for later. I’ll knock on at eleven.’

‘Thanks.’

When he’d finished I said, ‘Do you need anything?’

‘I don’t know. Just nappies and baby wipes.’

Back in the house, I avoided the front room and went upstairs to make the phone call. I didn’t know who it was, or even where she was going. Yasmin had given me the number. They were coming and taking her away. That’s all I wanted to know. I’d done my bit. The voice on the phone sounded English and chummy, so it must be True Brits organising the getaway. I said, ‘What time is the news on?’ And he said, ‘Eleven-thirty on the dot.’

So I said, ‘Good to know.’

I went downstairs and got the clothes from the dryer and packed them into a satchel for Yasmin, then I popped to the shop for the diapers and baby wipes. I’d bought them a few times from the Co-op and I wondered whether they suspected anything. When I got home granddad shouted, ‘Stella! So was there damp?’

‘No. It was fine. The dehumidifier has done the trick.’

‘Have you left it on?’

‘Yeah.’

I stumped into the kitchen. It was my day off. I was a carer and had mostly morning and lunchtime calls so I was knackered by the time I got to a Sunday. I reached in the cupboard and ate a couple of digestives and put the kettle on. I’d pack the diapers and then there was nothing more to do till eleven. Yasmin would be putting on her blonde wig. Quite a nice one I’d got from Paul’s Hair on Oldham Street.



I made some tea for his lordship, but he was asleep with his mouth open. I thought about shoving a biscuit in his hole but I slumped on the other sofa and flicked through the channels on silent.

If you were watching the telly, nothing seemed that much different anyway. The Asian man didn't read the news – only True Brits on the telly. They listed the dead police on the news and put their pictures in the papers.

I must have dozed off cause the next thing I knew mum was at the door, going 'Haven't you made any tea?'

'You what?' I said.

'What've you been doing all day? Where's the tea?'

'I'm getting it.'

'Just get us a takeaway, will you.'

'You mean fish and chips.'

'That's what I meant.'

There was no Chinese anymore. It was fish and chips or nothing. That was the only thing people protested about: taking away the takeaways. I miss a curry, I do. I went to the chippy and got us all fish and chips, though granddad could only manage half of his. It was a shame, really, seeing him go like this. He was fading. To be honest, he always has been a bit racist, though no one uses that word anymore. He was always going on about immigration. Yasmin didn't know this but he used to say he wouldn't go to a 'Paki' doctor. Yasmin's parents weren't even from Pakistan. They were from Bangladesh and left when her dad was sacked from the surgery and 'go home' was sprayed on their windows. It was all part of the voluntary repatriation scheme.

Anyway, by 10pm I was pacing the kitchen, tidying and that. Mam and granddad were watching the TV. I was making a brew for them. I took it through and sat on the couch. 'You OK?' mam asked.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Just sorting some stuff in the kitchen.'

'What stuff?'

'Hand washing and that.'

She looked at me like I was mad. I shrugged and went back to the kitchen and faffed about some more. Then it was 10.45, so I went upstairs and got the bag. I wasn't doing a good job of being discreet, stumping about. Mam always said I was heavy footed. I

was stressed because they were usually in bed by now, but they were watching the Royal Variety Show. I'd just have to get Yasmin out of the bunker and garden quietly and past the windows at the back. Maybe I was wrong about them and mum would coo over the baby and say Yasmin could have the box room, and granddad would say, 'Well, you're not that black.' It was hard to know these days what people would do.

At 11.10 I crept into the garden. The curtains were closed behind me so there was less worry there. Inside the shed I clattered over a shovel. I knocked three times on the trapdoor.

'It's me!'

I opened the trapdoor and climbed down the steps. Yasmin was waiting on the bed and she hadn't cleaned up. She had on her blonde wig and hat. Her baby was asleep in her arms. Good. She glanced at me and then back at her baby.

'Are you ready?' I asked.

She nodded.

'I've got the bag,' I said.

I climbed up the steps, set the torch on the ground and Yasmin passed the baby up to me. He opened his big brown eyes. He had such long eye lashes. They were beautiful. 'Shhhhh,' I said and held him against me. Yasmin struggled up the steps and I gave the baby to her. 'He's awake,' I whispered.

Her baby wasn't dark at all. I thought maybe he could pass as mine. I had dark hair. Olive skin...but he cried every time I held him, so that was no good.

It was a clear night outside. Yasmin looked around. 'Fresh air,' she said.

'Sssshhhh.'

There didn't seem to be anyone around. There were lights on behind the curtains. Mum and granddad were still watching the telly. We tiptoed across the grass, past the windows, and down the side of the house. At the front I could see the van in the street. That was it. A Blue Nissan. Window Cleaners.

'What you doing?'

I turned. Mum was at the front door. 'What's going on?'

'Nothing mum.'

'Who's that?'

'This is Y..Jemima. She's just passing by.'

'I don't know what you think you're up to Stella. Are you stupid or what?'



Granddad opened the curtains and stared. Then he banged on the window.

‘Quick,’ I said. We edged down the path to the front gate. But then the Smiths opened their door and stared. The blue van started up and drove away.

Mrs Smith pointed at Yasmin, and mum pointed too like she was an alien or something. Yasmin held the baby against her and my throat tightened. My mum and Mrs Smith came over. Mrs Smith pulled Yasmin’s wig off and said, ‘Fucking non Brit. What you doing here?’

‘Get your hands off me, you stupid cow,’ Yasmin said.

‘You cheeky little....’ Mrs Smith held up her hand and slapped Yasmin across the face. Yasmin fell backwards. I caught the baby and steadied her.

‘What do you think you’re doing, Stella?’ Mum said.

‘Get that thing out of my garden.’ Granddad was at the door.

The neighbours from next door but one came in their slippers and dressing gowns and crowded round. They were silent, watching her. ‘Get her off our street,’ one said. ‘Yeah. We don’t have your likes on our road.’

‘Stella,’ mum said. ‘Come inside.’

Yasmin tried to get past them. Mrs Smith blocked her way. ‘Look at you. Breeding.’

‘Let me past you bitch.’

‘Don’t talk to my wife like that,’ Mr Smith said. He stepped forward and hit her. Then he held her head and punched her again in the face and they closed in on her and I backed away with the baby crying in my ear.

## Significant Objects in My Grandmother's Life

**The Jewellery Box** had a side panel that eased up to reveal a secret drawer. When I was little and if I was very, very careful, I was allowed to slide the drawer out and look at the odd ends of jewellery and a pair of cufflinks. Gran didn't keep the gifts from my grandfather - her engagement ring and crystal watch - in here. They were hidden elsewhere. Across the lid, the letter G was carved amidst swirls and dashes. I always thought G stood for Gran, as if she had no other name, but it stood for George.

**The Gloves** my great-grandmother was wearing when she slapped my grandmother across her face. She had been talking to a young man on the street. The gloves were worn to church and on special occasions. They were smooth as they caught her cheek. The boy, she never told me his name, was shocked, but not that much. He stepped backwards and held up his hands, wondering whether he would be next. That was before the war, and nothing came of her relationship with the boy. He apologised, said he meant no offence and smiled at my great-grandmother, so that her hand wavered in the air and she forgot herself. He was a charmer.

**The Ballet Shoes** she wore when she danced in a workhouse. Her mother forked out for ballet lessons. They were expensive. My grandmother was supposed to be very grateful. The ballet group had prepared a section from Swan Lake and danced in a long, dark hall. Before them sat rows of people. Women on the left. Men on the right. They had dry, gnarled faces and wore grey garments. It seemed, as she pirouetted across the room, that before her were not people, but rows of empty sacks with heads on them.

After the dancers had curtsied, and the audience had clapped, the dancers were taken into a back room, where lunch was waiting. My grandmother peeked back into the hall to see the sacks standing up, revealing dirty, bare feet. As the sacks filed out, a woman whose hair was shorn, stared at my grandmother till she was ordered on by the matron. My grandmother was called through and lined up with the other girls with their plates. On the table, there were sandwiches with cheese and tinned ham. There were little buns for dessert. It was a horrible tea party. A feast. A banquet. The owners of the workhouse smiled and thanked the girls for their charitable act of entertaining the inmates. My grandmother raised a cheese sandwich to her mouth. It was dry and stuck to her gums. She



could not eat her sandwiches. She lifted one foot and then the other. Her ballet shoes pinched her feet.

**The Book** she was always hiding. She was supposed to be busy in the afternoons. Girls kept their hands busy. As a teenager she yearned to slip off to the tree at the bottom of the garden, where there was a low branch to sit on with her feet up and her skirt wrapped around her knees. Here she could drink up the pages. When she was married, she would learn to discipline herself, and in those afternoons when her own children were at school, she would not read; she would keep her hands busy.

**The Photograph** of my mother and her cousin Donald. She has bouncing blonde curls. He has dark hair under a small cap. They are walking down a street in Oban together, holding hands. He is leading her. I don't know where. He is a few inches taller, but their knees, under their respective shorts and skirt, are the same.

**The Cufflinks in the Jewellery Box** were given to her a week before G for George's death. I don't know the details, but when I imagine them it's like an old war film, *Brief Encounter*. Very romantic and intense. Perhaps they met at a dance, or while walking round a square in Portsmouth. She'd be in her WRENS uniform. They'd only known each other for two weeks, but they planned to marry. It was 1945. George flew out on D Day, and his plane was shot down over the Atlantic. A telegram came from his friend, John, whom she had met.

She kept the cufflinks in the jewellery box and didn't let herself look at them.

**The Dinner Service** was pristine, with blue paisley flowers along the edge, but she had counted two chips: one on a side plate, another on a cup. They had barely survived the trip to Malaya where my grandfather was stationed. The heat was a film on their skin. It was too hot to eat a roast dinner, but the plates were set out on the table. My grandmother was not hungry; her stomach was churning. My grandfather's barking was still in her ears, like an ongoing gale. Her children wanted to be outside, playing on the beach.

My grandmother was silent and her hands were in her lap. This was the only weapon she had. She held it against her chest, nursed it, and felt it build in her, churning and potent. She could keep it going for days, weeks if she had to. My mother kicked her

legs under the table; she could feel the tension. So could the dog, who sat near the door, whining. The dog hated family arguments.

My grandmother didn't argue back. My grandfather, whom she married three years after the war, was too forceful, too blustery; she too easily cried. She served her daughters and him, leaving her own plate empty. He sighed; he wanted to mend things for her, fill in the holes, but he couldn't. My mother picked and poked at her dinner. She'd prefer rice with sugar and milk. The dog whined and barked at the door. My grandmother got up and opened the door. The dog dived into the garden and found shade under the tree.

**The Safety Pins** she wore on her Wrens skirt, which was straight and unforgiving. Coming home in 1945 with a bulge on her stomach, her town seemed faded and wrong, as if she was looking at an old photograph. The high street she had walked up, the shop where she had worked, misted in thick Scottish rain, was slanted, as if her body was tilted at a different angle.

Her mother's reaction would be more efficient, less angry than she expected. She'd be kept indoors and though everybody knew - of course they did - her parents would adopt her baby. It would be theirs. When my grandmother marries my grandfather and has my mother, she will visit her son every day, but my great grandmother will never allow her to have him back.



## What He Doesn't Tell Her

Gwen hasn't been to the library in years. She gets her books from the supermarket now. No point borrowing when they're £3.91. She's here to listen to a story for World Book Day. Gwen finds a seat. Her legs are aching from wandering around the shops. She'd taken the afternoon off work to treat herself to a new top – something sexy, but she'd found nothing. Then she had stood outside the library, the wind buffeting her hair, and wondered whether to go home. Home. She cannot bear to be at home: the murmur of the radio for company, filling the hours till she picks up her son. World Book Day, the poster said. Commissioned reading by local author.

The story is supposed to be about a refugee. The writer, who is standing in front of the rows of chairs, is admitting that when she came to Chester to do research for the story, she ended up shopping. The audience laughs. Gwen is getting comfortable when she hears a ring tone coming from her bag. She reaches down and rummages in it. Where is her phone? She rushes out, crushing her bag to her chest. The rows of heads turn and glare as she hurries past to the main doors. Outside, in the chill air, she crouches on the ground and searches again. Tissues, keys, lipstick and nicorette inhalers tumble onto the pavement.

There's her phone in the inner pocket. A missed call from Tom – but the divorce papers are through. Why is he ringing now? Probably to tell her about the damp in his new flat, and how he burnt his tin of soup or his M&S ready meal; and she'll say I'm sorry, ahem, yes, and he won't even ask how she is, so she puts her phone in her bag and gathers up her belongings.

She notices a young black man standing in the doorway. His cap is pulled low over his ears. He huddles in his khaki jacket against the cold. She looks for a cigarette and remembers she has given up. Part of her new post-divorce regimen. She opens the nicorette inhaler instead. She frowns at the man warily. Under his cap a scar creeps down behind his ear. What's he doing standing there?

'Do you have *un cigarette*?' he asks with an accent.

'Sorry, no, I've given up. Got this though.'

She hands him the other inhaler - she has stocked up. He peers at it and sniffs it. Shrugging, he says, 'I give up too.' They both laugh then smoke their inhalers, watching the people milling in the square and the clouds forming over the cathedral. Gwen shivers.

She can't go back into the reading. Not after that. She's picking up her son from football and dropping him at his friend's in a bit. Then she will have to go home.

'Where are you from?' she asks the man.

He glances behind him. Two men in police-like uniform are striding across the square. The man looks as if he is going to run, but then he lets his arms fall by his side. The police are on him, asking him for ID. 'Pardon?' he says. They lead him to their van and search him. The man doesn't resist, but he turns and starts to shout something over his shoulder. A crowd is growing, staring as if it's a street performance and Gwen watches as he is pushed into the van.

Inside the van, Japhet is shaking. The handcuffs are cold and heavy on his wrists. He can hear cars outside, a siren, voices. From somewhere there is music. He turns and peers around him in the dark. One of the policemen is sitting on the other side. He seems unaware of Japhet, as if they are merely passengers on a bus. Japhet draws his legs in. He is not sure how they found him. He had just come from a refugee meeting and instead of heading back to his friend's sofa, he'd walked to the square, where he'd stared up at the Town Hall and the Cathedral and smelt the Cornish pasties from the cafe. Then he'd stood in the doorway of the library, to feel the warmth on his back.

They had been tracing him for weeks. After his appeal had been refused he had taken to staying out at night. When he returned one morning, the Rwandan family he lived with had been taken. For a while, their cramped flat had felt like home; the three little boys would hang onto his legs and the mother told him off as if he was another son.

Japhet closes his eyes and takes breaths to stay calm. Chada. He still dreams of going home. In these dreams the doorway to his hut is dark and cool. Inside is shadowy and passageways lead off to hidden rooms. As he creeps through he finds members of his family lying on the floor, an uncle, an aunt, as if asleep, and in other rooms he finds babies wrapped in cloths. But he keeps going. He can't stop.

He flexes his fingers in the dark. He must have dropped the cigarette thing. The woman's hands were shaking when she gave it to him.

The crowd is dispersing. On the ground is the nicorette. Gwen picks it up and turns it in her hand. She walks to where her metro is parked on a back street. The inside of the car needs cleaning, dust rims the dashboard. A car lets her into the queue on the main road.



The teatime traffic is heavy and the sky darkens, as if it is going to rain. The window mists up so she wipes it with her hand. In front is a police van. It seems to be the one from the square. Perhaps she is behind the arrested man, merely a few feet away, but he is in the van and she is in her car. What will happen to him? It's beginning to rain and the wipers squeak on the glass. She keeps her eyes on the van ahead.

Under his coat, Japhet is dripping with sweat, even though he is cold. His face is clammy and feverish. He could slump on the floor of the van, close his eyes and never wake. Everything could end now. Here, in this van. He remembers the first time he travelled in a truck. He, Armel and Lionel were on their way home to Chada from the school in the next village. He was carrying his new school book under his arms, which he had carefully wrapped to keep it clean. His mouth was dry and the sun was still sharp on his cheeks. They heard the truck before they saw it and waited curiously to see what kind of truck it was. An army truck – the best - drove round the bend and stopped. Soldiers jumped out and he tried to run into the undergrowth, but the soldiers were fast and one twisted Japhet's arm and lifted him into the back. He and his friends huddled on the hard, sandy floor.

They were taken to a camp surrounded by green, sweet smelling trees where they slept jammed together and ate bowls of watery rice. Three days later he was made to shoot a boy, who crumpled on the floor, as if he was made of leaves. Then they were marched along the shores of Lake Kivu and for the first time he saw how its water flooded the horizon.

His family would never have him back, not after what he had done. That was what he was told. The soldiers trained him and the other boys to work as messengers and foragers for food in the hills, and later as guards and look outs. They learned to fight, how to hold a gun. They lived in caves, in temporary barracks, ruined brick houses, and sometimes they camped near the gorillas. He'd done what he had to do - things that are now black patches in his mind. But he had dreamed of something else, some other life. It came to him like a radio broadcast from somewhere far away; tinny and faint.

He left when he heard the rebel group was returning to Chada. The government's troops were also advancing. He knew what both sides would do to Chada as they passed through. That night he set off with his money stored under his shirt, even though people in Chada would drive only him away. Killer, they would call him. He walked for two days, only stopping for snatches of sleep. His village was not as far as he thought.

Chada was deserted. Japhet crept around, wondering which hut had been his home. From the tracks, the scattered pots and wood, the lame goat tied to a pole, he could see they had left quickly. They must have fled to refugee camps. He'd untied the goat, so it could run off into the forest, but it hobbled a few paces then stood and watched Japhet sitting on the ground, fingering the dark, hard earth.

In the van, the air is thick and hard to breathe. He knows he will be taken to a detention centre and then to the receiving pens at the airport. After the other passengers are seated on the plane, he will be escorted on. He will have to sit, cuffed like he is now, till he arrives in Kinshasa, where he will be greeted by officials. They will arrest him because he is a known member of a rebel group and then... he can't think about then.

The van brakes and he is thrown forward. He can feel the metal on his wrists. He pulls till his wrists hurt. Then he yanks at the chain and wrenches it. The policeman starts, placing his hand on his holster. 'Calm it,' he says. Japhet lunges forward, as if he could pull himself free, but he is thrown back in his seat. The van turns, then shudders to a stop. In the sudden quiet, Japhet can hear the rain, heavy as a monsoon.

Instead of turning right at the junction, Gwen has turned left behind the van. She isn't sure why – maybe it was sharing the nicorette - but here she is, heading out of the city, its walls far behind her.

The van turns a corner and drives down a narrow street, where it halts, half on the kerb. She follows and stops her car. The uniformed man gets out the front, walks round the side and climbs in the back. His foot slips and for a moment he seems about to topple, but he grabs the door and pulls himself inside. She waits, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel and glancing round. In the dark she sees it's a road of old warehouses, with a skip. Then she hear noises from the van, shouting. Perhaps she could do something. Her phone rings its strident tune. She rummages in her bag, finding it this time. 'Hi Mark,' she says.

'Mum. Thought you were picking me up. Where are you?'

'I'm just on my way. I won't be long.'

'You're really late!'

'Sorry sweetheart. I'll be there in a few minutes.'

She switches on the engine. It's quiet in the van and she wonders what has happened. But she should pick up her son; she has things to do, so she turns the car around.



On the main road she hunches over the wheel; the rain is fierce and the car lights are blinding in the dark.

## The War Tour

This is a story about war. It's a note of what a woman called Aida told me in a bar in the Bascarsija quarter. I met her last summer on a ten-hour train ride from Budapest to Sarajevo. I was inter-railing with Paul, who I had been seeing for two months. He had just finished his PhD in critical theory. We had boarded the plush, air-conditioned train in Budapest, but after an hour or so we were shifted onto a coach and then an old fashioned train with six-seat compartments and windows that barely opened.

As the train travelled south, the carriage thickened with heat till we were left gasping for breath. I could feel sweat pouring down my back and my legs stuck to the seat. Paul had fallen asleep, his head to the side, as if he was drugged from the heat. I was glad. I could relax. We had spent the last few days bickering about money and directions, and he'd gone in a mood every time I wanted a quiet moment to do some notes or writing.

We had the window seats, while three Australian lads had slumped in the other corner, their faces glazed and reddened. The girl next to me had short black hair with a long fringe that feathered onto her cheek. She squeezed past the Australians and pushed her face up to the small stream of air at the window in the corridor. I tried to fold a battered map of Budapest into a fan, but moving my arm was too much effort.

The evening cooled, the other passengers stood up and stretched, as if waking from a coma. Most were backpackers, wearing flip-flops and crumpled shorts, and carrying rolled up sleeping bags. The woman next to me opened her eyes and reached for her water bottle. I eyed it enviously. Paul and I had run out so we were drinking the warm vodka and multi-fruit juice we'd bought at the station. I flicked through the photocopies of a guidebook. *Sarajevo is beginning to attract visitors for more than its warring past....* I skimmed the pages then looked up to see the girl turning a wedding ring on her finger. She looked at her hand and then eased the ring off and placed it in a small velvet string bag. She caught my eye and I said, 'I can't believe the heat. I thought we were going to be cooked alive.'

'The train is always like this,' she said. 'Boiling in summer, freezing in winter.'

I couldn't figure out her accent. 'Where are you from?'

'Sarajevo. I live in Toronto, but flights only go to Budapest.'



She told me she was studying engineering in Toronto. She was coming back to visit her mother. I told her I was from Manchester and we swapped numbers. I said I was writing some stories and I'd like to chat to her about Bosnia. 'Ok,' she said.

Paul sighed and folded his arms. 'What?' I said.

'Nothing.'

Paul and I booked into a hostel on 'Pigeon Square', which piled backpackers in and out of 12 and 15-bed dorms. We were prepared with our earplugs and mosquito spray. In the morning we looked out at the *srbilj*, the fountain ('*dated 1891*' I read aloud), at the low-roofed cafes and polished cobblestones, then at our photocopied guide. We decided to go on the hostel's 'war tour' because it didn't involve walking. We were driven in a minibus out of the Bascarsija quarter *where behind the tourist panache Sarajevo keeps its soul* ('will you stop reading it aloud,' said Paul); over the Princip bridge *where the assassination of Arch Duke Ferdinand ignited WW1* (I muttered) past houses covered in potholes and shell marks and buildings patterned with bullets, and then up steep roads to the remnants of the bobsleighs from the Olympics (1984).

We walked along one of the tubular tracks. It was battered and broken, like a relic from a lost age. It curved up into the trees to a jagged end amidst the branches. Paul and I joined two lads for photos. We sat in a row on the track, pretending to be bobsleigh drivers and giggling. Paul was wary of them till we found out they were married to each other.

Our guide was a young boy. In his long shorts and trainers he didn't look old enough to have experienced the war. He sipped from a can of Coke and told us how the Serbs shot at the Bosnians from these vantage points and pointed to houses only yards from the cliff of trees. We looked over the edge and at each other, as if expecting something more. As we were piled into the minibus to go to the tunnel I thought about the girl on the train. I'd text her. I was curious and eager for details.

We drove to the outskirts on the west of Sarajevo where the buildings hadn't been renovated. The houses were cracked with shell marks. 'This way,' the boy guide said. We were at a small house. 'This is the tunnel museum,' the boy guide said. 'It was built in 1993.' We followed him into a back garden, where there was a tunnel dug into the ground. The garden was lush, full of blackberry bushes and pear trees. Behind it were fields. 'The tunnel was 800 metres long and was used to smuggle food and supplies during the siege.'

The interior of the house had been turned into a museum. We peered at the empty shell cases, bullets and camouflage equipment. The boy guide handed round an old shell. We felt its weight in our hands, its rusty smoothness. 'Look at it!' I said to Paul. He shook his head and turned away. They passed a rifle around and a man pretended to fire it. The guide told us about war tactics, ammunition and how the Serbs had surrounded the city, pointing to places on a map. I was fascinated. Paul wasn't. 'What is this?' he whispered. 'War Disneyland?'

Later, we crouched down in the tunnel, felt the wooden boards under our feet and the corrugated iron walls and looked at photos of men coming out of it. I tried to imagine walking through the water. A few feet down it was blocked off. Outside, a man in a football cap said to a woman, 'This tour is rubbish. There's nothing to see.'

'Have you done Auschwitz?' she asked.

'Yeah. That was heavy. And Birkenau.'

Paul rolled his eyes at me. 'Have you done Auschwitz?' he repeated. 'It makes me sick.' We wandered into the garden and I told Paul about the time I went to see the flattened remains of the concentration camp in Krakow. The one in *Schindler's List*. There was nothing left, just a field, some knocked over gravestones (it was built on a Jewish graveyard) and next to it, an abandoned house the guidebook said was used for interrogation by a member of the SS. Two lads I'd met and I had tiptoed in the open door and down to the cellar. We used the camcorder on the mobile as a light to look into the dark, empty rooms till we scared ourselves silly. We ran out laughing and exclaiming, 'This is like *The Blair Witch Project*!'

Paul looked at me. 'You filmed it?'

Paul and I spent the afternoon wandering round the Turkish quarter, looking at the bazaars, the bronze coffee pots and tiny cups. I texted Aida, and she replied, 'Yes, let's meet at seven in cafe Atriksa.' Paul and I stopped for a coffee and sat on plush chairs outside a cafe. We dropped large sugars into our tiny coffee cups and nibbled Turkish delight. I was telling Paul about my writing, what I was trying to do, when he said, 'Can't we just enjoy our holiday?'

I sat back on the cushion. 'I thought you were interested.'

'I am. But I don't go on about my PhD all the time, do I?'



‘Sorry.’

His face was red. ‘I mean,’ he continued. ‘You don’t even know what you’re talking about. You don’t know the first thing about war.’

I could feel my eyes pricking.

‘Don’t. Don’t cry at me.’

I got up and went to the toilet to splash my face. It was a tiny cubicle. My nose was burnt and my eyes were red. I went outside and said, ‘I’m going to meet Aida. I’ll see you later.’

I was still upset when I got to the bar. The walls were covered in posters of The Stone Roses and Oasis, as if the bar was in homage to Manchester. Aida was sitting in a chair at the back and clutching a small glass. Her hair was spiked and her jeans were ripped and patched. ‘Hi,’ she said. ‘Do you want a plum brandy, a *sljivovica*?’

‘Yes please.’

We chatted about Sarajevo and the tour I’d been on. ‘I can’t believe they have turned it into a tour,’ she said. She had never seen the tunnel, though her father, or *babo*, as she called him, had gone through it for supplies. She told me she’d had an awful day avoiding her mother’s questions about who she lived with in Toronto. Her mother was glad it was not with a man. Aida said she was engaged to a woman who was a Serbian immigrant. Of course her mother, her *Majka*, knew something was up, and kept prying, but she was ailing and Aida didn’t want to cause her anymore stress, so Aida kept lying and saying she was single. I told her about the two married lads. ‘Are you engaged to Paul?’ she asked.

‘God no,’ I said. ‘But we argue like a married couple.’

Then she said, ‘So what do you want to know?’

‘Just wanted to ask you about the war.’

‘That’s the first thing they ask me in Toronto. *So were you in the war?* I usually say I wasn’t.’

I sipped my brandy and texted Paul: I’m in The Atriksa Bar on Farhadija. Meet me here at nine? Sorry about earlier. Xxx.

‘So were you?’

‘Yeah. But I don’t want to tell everybody. Anyway, a lot of it is a blur,’ she said. ‘I was only ten when it started.’

---

Aida remembered standing on a chair, flicking the light switch on and off. 'Babo,' she said. 'Babo. It doesn't work.'

Babo was sitting at the kitchen table. 'It's all going to the dogs,' he said. Her majka was moving bedding into the kitchen. 'Don't bother your Babo,' she said. 'Hold these.' She passed Aida some pillow cases.

'Are we sleeping in here?' Aida asked.

'Yes. You're not to go in the bedrooms.'

'Why?'

'Will you try Fudha again?'

Babo sighed and dialled her number.

'Can I speak to her?' Aida asked.

'How are things there?' Babo placed his hand flat on the table. 'Majka wants you to come home.' He patted the table and said, 'I know, but we'd feel better if you were here.' He sighed. 'Majka. Speak to her. She won't listen to me.' Then he looked at the phone and pressed a button. 'It's gone dead.'

---

Aida put her earmuffs over her ears and sat on her put-up bed with her drawing book. She was trying to focus on her picture, but she couldn't with the explosions. They were all the time now. She hated them. She hated sleeping in the kitchen, and she hated nettle soup.

'Can't you do something useful?' Majka was trying to shift the kitchen table from the centre to the wall. 'Get up,' she said to Babo. 'I need to sort this room.'

Babo turned on the other put-up bed. It creaked and sagged in the middle. 'I was dreaming,' he said. 'The library was burning. I was trying to save the books. I was holding onto them and falling.'

'It's always the books. The precious books. What about the people?'

'You don't need to rearrange the kitchen again,' he said.



Majka heaved the table over and pushed the chairs under it. 'Why can't you do something instead of lying there? Why can't you go to the tunnel?' She looked around the kitchen. 'Aida. We need to move your bed.'

'OK,' Babo said. 'I'll go.'

---

Aida's coloured pencils were stubs. She was sitting at the table and drawing in brown, orange and grey – her least favourite colours. Red, yellow and pink were saved in her pencil case. She was drawing what she'd like Babo to get from the tunnel. Chocolate, baklava and new pencils. There must be a shop at the other end of the tunnel, beyond the airport. It was run by nice old women in scarves like Majka's.

'Bed time,' Majka said.

Aida shook her head. In her dream they had been blown up by a cartoon bomb, which was round with a fizzing fuse. Boom. Aida and her parents flew up into the air. Aida landed by the river, bouncing on the pavement. She ran through the streets, past the market and the mosque, but she couldn't find her parents.

'Come on.'

There was a knock at the door. 'It's me!' Babo called. 'Look what I've got,' he said, leading in a goat.

'What?'

'It's for Aida,' he said. 'And we can have milk.' His face was streaked with dirt and his clothes were damp up to his chest, as if he had waded through a river. He dumped the bags on the table.

'Are you mad? Where are we going to keep it?'

'I'll put a nail in the wall and tie it there for now,' he said, but he slumped on a chair, holding onto the leash. Aida edged over, held out her hand and stroked the goat's head. It had tufts of brown fur around its ears, while its thin body was white with brown specks, though it was very dirty. She was pleased. The goat liked her. 'Hello Nina,' she said. 'Let's call her Nina.'

Majka unpacked the bags. She placed flour, potatoes and cabbage on the table and then stared at them.

Aida was looking forward to a meal without nettles. She was sick of nettles; they were worse than cabbage.

‘I’m going to take some flour next door,’ Babo said.

‘Why?’

‘Gospovin Petrovic asked me to get some flour. They paid for it.’

‘They’re Serbs. You’d think they would have left.’

Babo picked up a bag of flour and walked out. He used to play chess with Gospovin Petrovic. They’d play at a table on the pavement outside their apartments, and Aida would sit on the kerb.

‘I don’t think you should,’ Majka called, but Babo just waved his hand from the foyer.

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‘Where is your house? I asked Aida.

‘I can show it to you. It’s not far. North of Pigeon Square. ‘Want to see it?’

‘I’m supposed to be meeting Paul,’ I said, looking at my phone. A message from Paul said: ‘I’m with the lads. See you at the hostel later.’

‘Actually, I don’t think I’m meeting him,’ I said. I started to text, ‘What’s wrong?’, then stopped and put my phone in my pocket.

We left the bar. The road was crowded with tourists. The gift shops and ice cream parlours were still open on Farhadija. We walked to Pigeon Square and I filled my bottle with water at the fountain. ‘My hostel’s just here,’ I said. A group of backpackers were queuing outside. They looked tanned and dirty.

We walked up the steep hill next to the hostel and turned left onto a street of apartment blocks. We turned left again onto a road where most of the apartments were boarded up.

‘This is it.’

‘Which was yours?’

‘That one.’ She pointed to the end block. ‘The ground floor apartment. The bedrooms at the front were decimated.’

The house was potholed like the buildings I’d driven past that morning. The walls were blackened and part of the roof had fallen in.

‘And that’s where our neighbours lived,’ she said, pointing to a boarded up window.



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Aida must have got used to the sounds, the low rumble, the crackle of fires. But in the early morning she would peer out the corner of the kitchen window and see the peaks of the mountains and everything would look peaceful. Perhaps there weren't any snipers up there at all. Or perhaps they were having a lie in. Then she'd look down and see the holes in the buildings and the piles of rubbish and Majka would call her away from the blackout paper.

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'You can't lie here forever,' Majka said. 'Just get up. Do something!' She pulled at Babo's arm. 'Get up,' she said. 'What's wrong with you?' Her voice got higher. 'Why can't you be a man?' She slapped him on the arm. His head dropped onto the pillow and she hit him on the back. 'Just do something.' But Babo turned away from her. She sat on the bed, rocking back and forth.

Aida was curled on the other bed. She crept over to Nina and put her arms around her neck, but Nina was scared and pulled on her rope, wriggling out of Aida's grasp.

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'Come in Ferid. What do you want?' Babo said.

'How is Zudha?'

'She is with her *husband* in Foca,' Babo said. 'We haven't heard from her in months.'

Ferid nodded, leaning on the table. Aida remembered him. He had courted Zudha. Babo had never liked him. He used to wear a leather jacket and would screech up and down the road on a scooter. Just before the war, Zudha had met the neat-looking Murat, and married him instead. Now, Ferid looked different. The leather jacket was replaced by a long coat, which hung loosely from his shoulders. 'You need to leave your house tonight,' he said. 'This building won't be safe.'

'Why? Is this to do with Gospovin Petrovic?'

'Don't ask why. You can stay at number 26.'

---

When it was dark they left the apartment, crept along the side of the road, and into the neighbour's apartment Ferid had indicated.

The woman let them into her kitchen. There was a bed by the wall and a mattress on the floor. 'You can sleep here,' she said.

'Thank you,' Majka said. Babo brought in bags of clothes, the tin stove and the remains of food. Then he led in the goat. The woman looked at the goat and said, 'Tie it to the door.'

---

Aida went to sleep between her parents. She woke and one side of her was cold. She blinked and when her eyes became used to the dark, she saw that Babo was sitting at the window and stroking Nina. He eased back the blackout paper and peered through the glass. When Aida woke again, just as it was getting light, he was still sitting there, his head to the side and his mouth hanging open, snoring.

---

They returned home that evening. Babo stopped outside Gospovin Petrovic's house. It was burnt out. Inside the window was black and charred. 'Come on,' Majka said, heading to their door. Inside, their kitchen was the same, but the windows had shattered. Aida shivered in her coat, as she perched on the bed. Majka tried to get the stove going while Babo put cardboard up at the windows.

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Later, Aida would look through next door's windowpane at the burnt out kitchen and imagine Gospovin Petrovic still in there. He would be sitting at the dining table, as if he is waiting for his dinner to arrive, with his knife and fork in his hands, and his wife would be cutting bread and chatting to him.

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I got my cardigan out of my bag and draped it over my shoulders. It was cold up here. You could see the mountains on the other side of the city. I checked my phone, but there was still nothing from Paul. *What do you know? Stop going on about your writing.*

We walked back down the road, looking up at the burnt out buildings. Aida lit a cigarette. 'Want one?'

'No thanks. What happened to the goat?'

'We could not feed her and one day she ran away. We never found her.'

'Oh.' I hugged my arms around myself. 'What about your sister?'

'I'm not talking about my sister,' she snapped. She finished her cigarette, looking away from me. Then she ground her cigarette under her trainer. 'Let's go up here,' she said, pointing up a steep road. 'At the top, there's a park with a cliff and a great view of the city.'

One side of the road was lined with houses and on the right there was a cemetery with white gravestones, lit up by lamps. I stared at the gravestones and then turned to look at the city. Amidst the streets and houses there were cemeteries dotted around, lit like this one. I searched in my bag for my camera, but I paused. I could hear the sound of singing, a low and mournful voice was coming from nearby.

'What's that?' I asked.

'The call to prayers,' Aida said, pointing to a loudspeaker tied to a lamppost. We sat on the cemetery wall and listened.

## Fishfinger

Sam dangles Fishfinger, our depressed goldfish, in a bag over the canal. Fishfinger seems to have perked up with the ride. He swims back and forth in his lop-sided way, with one fin rusty and rotten and his sides fluffy with cotton wool disease.

‘Good bye, Fishfinger,’ Sam says.

I scuff my shoe back and forth over the stone edge. I’m cold in my best red coat and I’m not sure Fishfinger wants to move to the canal, but he was depressed in his tank. He jumped out, landing in a bowl of vanilla pot-pourri. We found him on Sunday morning, all hard with a coating of dried petals.

‘He doesn’t want to go, Sam,’ I say. ‘He’s scared.’

Sam rolls his eyes. ‘Fish don’t get scared,’ he says, in his ‘you’re stupid’ voice. ‘And they don’t get depressed.’

‘Why not?’

He’s saying that cause he wants to get rid of Fishfinger and buy a snake instead. Mum only lets us have one pet.

‘Mum won’t get you a snake,’ I say. ‘Because they smell *and* she’s away.’

That morning, mum was in bed and our house was icy cold. We shivered, even with our quilts draped like capes around our shoulders. We turned our quilts into toboggans to slide down the stairs.

‘Is he dead?’ I asked Sam as we stared at Fishfinger in his bed of pot-pourri.

‘Dunno.’

We picked off the petals and carefully put Fishfinger back in the tank. I hoped he wasn’t dead. We watched him float across the water on his side, like he was sunbathing.

‘I know,’ said Sam. ‘Whiskey’s good for goldfish. Mum has some in the oven.’ She hid the whisky from Aunty Ell. She isn’t our real aunt. She’s mum’s friend. ‘I’ll get it,’ I said, jumping up.

‘It’s my idea. I’ll get it.’

He ran into the kitchen, with his Duckula quilt trailing behind him. I followed and watched as he reached into the oven and brought out the bottle. He hid it under his quilted arm, with a magician-style twirl.



‘Mum’s in bed,’ I said, because his make-believe was silly. ‘You don’t need to hide it.’

‘You never know.’

He looked over his shoulder, as if mum might walk in. She did sometimes appear from nowhere. She was less good at entrances than she used to be. She was always in bed and eating chocolate digestives for dinner because she was depressed. We hid the new packet of biscuits in the washing machine, so she wouldn’t eat them all. Sam poured some of the pee-coloured drink into the cap and dropped a little into the tank.

‘Let me do it.’

‘Ok. Just a drop. He’s probably dead anyway.’

I very carefully dribbled a little on his mouth.

‘Not on *him*, silly. In the water. So he can drink it.’

‘I am!’

We watched floating Fishfinger and waited for him to wake up.

‘Poor Fishfinger,’ I said. ‘Perhaps he was lonely. Perhaps he was depressed.’

We gave him little prods with our fingers, so his gills stayed under the water, but nothing happened.

Aunt Ell had said *mum was depressed*, which was why we had to have the TV on very low. We had takeaways every night, except when Aunty Ell came round with her horrible corn-beef stew.

We squint in the afternoon light. ‘They don’t get depressed,’ Sam says, ‘because they only have a three second memory!’ Sam thinks he knows a lot. I’m sick of knowing and not knowing, so I ignore him, and wave as a barge passes, painted in blue and green and maroon. The bargeman waves back. I’d love to live in a barge. They’re much better than houses.

That morning, we’d watched Dangermouse and ate Sugar Puffs from the box, wrapped in our quilts. We checked Fishfinger. He had woken up and was flipping his fins. No wonder mum liked whisky. Then we remembered mum’s coffee. We made her a mug with milk to the handle and two biscuits. We waited outside her room, listening and holding our breath. The door was locked. We pushed and turned the handle, but it didn’t open.

There are barges parked on the other bank with names like 'The Explorer' or 'Jilly'. Behind the barges pokes a long, thin chimney from a factory we're not allowed to play near.

Fishfinger is shiny inside his bag, like the old amber brooch in gran's jewellery box. 'I want to keep him,' I say. 'He doesn't want to go in the canal.' But Sam holds the bag up high and tips it. 'Sam, no!' I try to grab his arm, but he pushes me back and I land on the grass. The water and Fishfinger pour into the canal. I expect Fishfinger to dive, like at the Olympics, but he belly flops, like me at swimming. My bottom hurts. But I jump up to peer in the canal. He flips around and disappears into the gloom, plants and a shopping trolley. We stare into the murky water, at the grill-pan pattern of the trolley. It has rusty edges, like Fishfinger.

I turn and kick Sam in the ankle. 'Idiot!' I charge down the canal and call, 'Fucking idiot!' I keep going till my nose runs and I have to use my sleeve. Ahead, a man is fishing. I stop and watch him warily, but he just stares at the water and his rod. What if he catches Fishfinger? Behind me, Sam is still where we were, throwing stones into the water. I make a run for it past the fisherman.

We'll have to get back to Aunty Ell's soon. But I don't like staying with her. I'd prefer to stay on a barge. Mum would too. I think of getting in bed with her in the morning. Mum wrapped up in her duvet. I'd jump on her. 'Alarm Aliss!' I'd cry. 'Ring, ring, ring'. 'Alarm Aliss,' she'd reply, her voice muffled from under the duvet. When mum's head appeared, spikes of hair would be stuck to the side of her face.

Then she started to shout when I did Alarm Aliss. So I'd watch from the doorway, playing with the handle, and see if she was awake or not.

That morning, mum's door was closed. We knocked. But she didn't reply. We tried the handle and pushed. It wouldn't open. 'Mum!' we called. She didn't say anything. Not even, 'Get lost, you two,' or 'Shut the fuck up!'

We were frightened. We shouted and shouted 'Mum!' 'Mum!' and banged and hit the door. I spilt the coffee on my pyjamas and the carpet. We stood there, knocking, till our knuckles were raw and red. We didn't know what to do, so Sam phoned Aunty Ell. She'd put her number on the fridge. I sat by mum's door, my chin on my knees, shivering without my quilt. I pulled up my pyjama leg and scratched an itchy scab on my shin. Mum's biscuits were broken and crumbled beside me, so I picked at them and squashed them between my fingers.



Aunty Ell brought an ambulance and they opened the door. We were taken into the kitchen by a woman, even though I cried and screamed and wanted to go into mum's room. We're still not allowed in her room or even the house. Later, Aunty Ell got some of our clothes and toys and Fishfinger. She says mum will be back soon. She's gone away to get better and have a rest.

I like to pretend I live on a barge with mum. We make coffee and inside it is cosy with a stove and lots of biscuits and sometimes I let Sam live there too if he lets me use the remote.

I sit on the edge of the canal. The water is still and thick and dark. I wonder if Fishfinger is nearby. I miss him already. I won't be able to look at his empty tank back at Aunty Ell's. I hear Sam approaching. But he doesn't kick my ankle. He sits beside me and our shoulders touch. He gets a stick and pokes it in the water. He pulls out a long, drooping plant for us to look at.

## Lad Lazarus

David clicked on Messenger. Dia hadn't logged in yet so he peered round the edge of his bedroom curtain. Kate, his sister and her mates were making their way down the road. He hated the kids round here, lounging on walls like they owned the world and kicking people's heads in for fun. And all he got from mum was, 'Can't you get away from that bloody computer. Why can't you speak to *real* people, David?'

He stared at the screen, willing her icon to pop up. His mum was singing 'My, my, m-y, De-li-lah!' at the top of her voice. 'Why, why, why, De-li-lah.' David cringed. She was probably at her roses again. Boxes of flowers were popping up everywhere for the flower competition; on doors, windows, hanging from streetlamps. She had found her 'inner florist' and always had dirty fingernails. He had to tell her to wash her hands when she made his sandwiches, but she'd just say, 'A bit of dirt won't kill you.' Last week some kids upended a basket, and she had rushed out and shouted, 'Don't you dare touch those flowers.' They had said sorry, looking sheepish.

But the flowers were sad and pointless. Like a few buds would sort everything out for her. Some evenings he could still hear her crying into a tea-towel in the kitchen. She went from one wanker to the next.

Dia's icon flashed at the bottom of the screen. *Hi*, he typed.

*Hey. What you doing?*

*Not much.*

*Are you ready to do it?*

*Now?*

Outside, Kate was leaning against James, who had chosen her over Michelle from Dillon Street. Michelle had skulked off somewhere, to cry probably. But after all the effort, the build up, Kate wasn't sure about the way his mouth was working round hers like a washing machine or how he was running his hands up and down her sides. He pulled away, looking pleased with himself. She smiled back. The skin around her mouth was itching and wet. It was not that romantic, not with everybody watching from the shop doorway, whooping. He made a gesture behind her back and she heard them laugh.



‘Let’s go over there,’ he said, and pulled her round the corner. They leant against the wall. She could feel the cold bricks against her back and his colder fingers creeping under her jacket, clammy and clasping her waist.

‘There’s Michelle,’ Kate said. Michelle was watching them from the other corner, her arms folded. Kate waved at her, then tilted her head back and smiled at James. His gelled messy hair had flattened itself into a side parting. She stroked it upwards. He stepped back and scruffed it up.

David liked his books stacked around his room. The musty binds gave the air of being trapped in a library vault. He stayed in his room, except for when he went to school or had to get food from the kitchen. He imagined Buile Hill as a castle with a ruler that stacked kids’ heads on spikes, and his minions feasted on the headless corpses. They lay in wait at the school entrance.

David had bruises and burns he hid from his mum. His head still hurt from when Kate’s so called mates had jumped on him outside the Co-op. They had circled him, each taking turns. Curled on the pavement, the blows had felt far away, as if he was a tiny creature hiding in the shell of his body. They only stopped when Kate came and threatened them.

David could only talk to Dia. They’d met playing The Eternal Stone, but spent more time chatting than playing and agreed that role-playing games were fake; they hid you from nothing. She sent photos of herself, all moody, with dark, sleek hair and told him in one long chat that she hated her parents; they never let her out of the house. He told her about the bullying, and how he hated everyone around him. They hadn’t met yet, but they were going to meet on the day. It had seemed right to wait till then, but then he had imagined them doing things together: like going for chips or to the shops. Dia’s icon flashed.

*I’m sick of life. I can’t fight it. I want to do it tonight.*

‘David. Where’s your sister?’ came from the hallway.

He turned from the computer. ‘How should I know?’

Mum put her head round the door. ‘Will you go and find your sister?’

‘I can’t. I’m busy. You have dirt on your cheek.’

‘We’re in the final! I’ve been planting all evening. It’s gone ten. She should be back.’

‘She’s just outside.’

‘Fine I’ll get her. You just look after yourself then.’

David blew his fringe out of his eyes and typed: *Wait. I think we should stick to the plan.*

He could hear his mother calling for Kate, as if she was calling for the cat. ‘Ka-ate, Ka-ate.’ Kate would love that.

*I can’t take it anymore. I can’t wait. I thought you were with me.*

*I am.*

*Then come meet me.*

*I’m not sure I’m ready.*

*If you’re not going to do it with me, I’ll do it on my own*

James stood behind Kate with his arms around her. She felt snug. Full of it. But something lurched in her stomach. He nuzzled her neck and swigged from the bottle.

‘I feel sick,’ she said.

‘Is that the effect I have on girls?’

She pulled away, ran back to the bushes and vomited onto the grass. She shouldn’t have mixed beer and vodka. David would be proud. When they both had a stomach virus they had compared how far they could project. She looked up. Above her was Michelle. ‘Hi Kate,’ she said.

Kate wiped her mouth with her hand. She needed to stand up, but she couldn’t. ‘What do you want?’

Michelle pushed her back on the ground and knelt over her. ‘Get the fuck off me,’ Kate said.

‘Oooh. I’m scared.’

Michelle was heavy. No wonder James didn’t want her. She was a fat cow.

‘I could ruin that face of yours,’ Michelle said.

Kate held her breath. Michelle was swimming above her. Kate sat up and pushed Michelle, so she fell backwards. ‘Fuck off,’ she said, getting up. James chased two boys up the street, kicking at them. One fell over and rolled into the road. A car drove round him. Kate went back to the others and huddled on the ground next to the empty beer cans. Her head was banging. She could hear her mother calling her. ‘Ka-te!’



James came back and leant against the wall, crossing his ankles. 'Fuckwits. Are you OK?'

'Yeah.'

'Do you want to come back to mine?'

'Ok,' she said.

They walked together, hand in hand across the field. Her heels tripped and sank in the wet grass. He strode ahead, so she dug out some chewing gum from her pocket. 'Come on,' he said. 'Get a move on. It's freezing.'

As they neared his house, she saw that the lights were off. 'Where are your parents?'

'Away. Didn't think I'd bring you back if they were in?'

'Course not.'

Inside, they stumbled into the living room. 'No, up here,' he said, and led her up the stairs to his bedroom. It was kind of childish with Batman curtains and a sweaty boy smell. She tried not to giggle at the matching bedspread. He got two cans of Carlsberg out from under his bed. They sat on the bed and sipped their beers.

'Come on then,' he said. 'Get your kit off.'

David stared at her words:

*If you're not doing it with me, I'll do it on my own. Just forget it. The plan is off.*

*Wait. Dia? Let's talk.*

He waited for her to reply, but there was nothing. Her icon went off line.

*Dia, Dia!*

He didn't even have her phone number. He didn't know her address, only that she lived in Swinton. They were going to do it together. They'd planned and researched the best method. She'd asked online groups for advice. She'd ordered their cocktail from an online pharmacy with a credit card she had got from somewhere. She was going to get a bus here and they'd go to the park together. David had found the perfect spot, hidden under a canopy of trees. They'd take the pills in the right order, with a bottle of Jack D and then put a plastic bag over both their heads. They would be in a little space cocoon, cut off from the world.

They'd written their notes and their wishes to be buried together. He'd imagined his mother making a four foot wreath, and Kate and her mates there, crying their eyes out.

He focused on the screen, willing her to come back online. But there was nothing.

'I can't find Kate.' His mother was at the door again. He glanced at her distractedly.

'It's late,' she said.

'Well how should I know? Call the police then.'

He sat back in his chair, shaking. His mother was going on at him from the door, like a crazed poodle, yapping at him.

'Just get out!' he shouted. His mother turned and stomped down the stairs.

The screen was still blank. Dia had been the one who had willed him on. She'd been bent on it from the beginning. She'd do what she wanted to do. It was nothing to do with him.

He reached and knocked a pile of books over. Perhaps she would go to the park anyway. He didn't want to be left here, alone. He grabbed his coat and ran down the stairs and out of the house.

'What?' Kate asked.

'Just joking.' He started to kiss her. Her mouth felt dry and ashy and the back of her throat stung. Surely he would notice she'd been sick. She opened her eyes. His were closed and concentrated. She felt the shock of his cold fingers on the inside of her jeans. Kate tensed as they moved to the zip, then she ducked her hips sideways, pulling away and laughing.

'More beer,' she said, gulping some. Then he pulled her over and said, 'Come on.' She felt a bit of herself slipping. He started to unbutton her jacket and shrug it off her shoulders. She had a short top on, which she'd hidden from mum going out of the house. Mum would be wondering where she was. She didn't want to think of her mother right now. Fuck her, Kate thought. She pulled off her jacket and kissed him fiercely. 'Woah,' he said. 'Slow down.'

'Sorry,' she said.

Kate tilted her head back and closed her eyes.

At the gate, David looked left and right. The street was empty, except for a cat darting over a wall. It was safe to go. He hurried, his hands in his pockets, then he broke into a run. Round the corner, there were a couple of lads leaning against the Co-op shutters. He could



hear them shouting as he sprinted past. The plan had been to meet at the bus stop on Bolton Road. The bus stop was empty. Of course, it would take her a while to get here from Swinton. He'd wait here for her and if she didn't come he would go home. And then he didn't know what he'd do. He huddled on the bench and muttered her name, over and over.

James had shoved Kate back on the bed and started to pull down her jeans. 'Come on,' he said. 'Don't you want it? You know I've liked you for ages. I've turned down girls for you.'

She smiled and thought she could just let herself go. But a part of her, somewhere in the back of her throat, wanted to cry. He leant over and pulled her jeans down. 'These are cute,' he said, stroking the edge of her knickers. 'Where's the loo?' she asked.

'You're not going anywhere.'

'I'll only be a minute.'

'OK. Just next door.'

She rolled away and pulled up her jeans. She shoved her feet half in her heels and staggered to the door. She'd leave. He wouldn't speak to her again. Michelle could have him. But she had to get out of here. She scurried down the hall and stairs. 'Kate!' she could hear as she ran through the kitchen. 'What's your problem?'

Outside, it was freezing. Her jacket was on the bed, but that didn't matter. The others might still be on the main road, so she half ran, half tripped across the field and then down a couple of entries. When she neared her house, she knew she didn't want to go in and face her mother, so she leant against the wall, out of breath and flicked her mother's roses.

The bus went straight past. He peered in the window, but he couldn't see her. All he could do was wait. Buses weren't frequent at this time of night. Then another came and a girl with black hair got off. She had a large rucksack. She was very small and thin and dressed all in black. David ruffled up his hair.

'Dia?' he said.

'What?'

'It's me.'

She shrugged and said, 'The park's this way isn't it?'

'Yeah.'

She crossed the road and he followed her.

'I've been worried,' he said.

'Well quit worrying.' She walked down the road and said. 'Which way is it?'

'Past the library. Then down Godfrey's.'

This wasn't how he'd imagined their meeting. She strode ahead and he ran to catch up. They walked till they got to the park. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to do. At the park he said, 'The hole in the fence is over here.' He climbed through and held it open for her bag. 'Are you really going to do it?'

She didn't reply. It was dark here. He could hardly see anything, but then Dia switched on a torch. She seemed very prepared.

He ducked under the branches. 'Here it is,' he said. She flashed the light over the remains of a small fire and crushed cans. She picked up the cans and piled them next to a tree. She looked round and said, 'This is perfect.' Then she sat down and redid her red lipstick. Her flashlight lit up her face, throwing up the hollows and shadows.

'You can go if you want.'

'No, I...' He sat down beside her and put his arms around his knees. She put her lipstick away and unpacked her rucksack. Some small bottles. A plastic bag. String.

'Are you gonna go through with it?' David asked.

'Course. I wasn't messin', like you were.' She turned to him. 'You let me down.'

Then he grasped her hand. 'I'll do it,' he said.

'No.'

'I will. I just want to kiss you first.'

She held the flashlight to his face. 'You're nicer than your photo,' she said. He could feel her breath on his cheeks. She was so close he kissed her. Her face and lips were cold in the night air, her skin was salty. He put his arms around her, feeling her thin shoulders. He kissed her harder, squashing her lips against his. She was so tiny he just wanted to clasp her to him, hold her like a teddy bear. He held her against him. He felt her wriggle and he tried to get his hands under her coat, but it was tight and heavy. Then something hit him in the jaw. It was her fist and her nails dug into his cheek. 'Get the fuck off me!' He fell back and she kicked him in the legs. 'What you trying on?'

'Sorry,' he said. 'I just...' He felt around in the dark and looked to the pool of light.

She grabbed the flashlight and shone it on him. 'Don't you move.' She picked up the bottles and the plastic bag and shoved them with one hand into her rucksack. 'I knew it.'



I knew you'd be like all the rest.' He could feel blood on his face. She slung her rucksack on her shoulder and backed away. At the edge of the clearing, she said, 'No fucking different,' and turned, bending under the branches.

'Dia,' he called. But she had gone. What had he been thinking? She'd hate him now. He got up and lurched forward, slipping on the mud. He held out his hands and lifted his feet so he didn't trip. He felt his way through the trees and low branches, the leaves and twigs scratching his face. When he was out of the bushes, he sank onto the grass and hugged his knees.

## Down Duchy Road

The winter I turned fourteen we called on a woman down Duchy Road. I thought she was American, but she was from Salford though she'd lived in South Carolina for many years. She was called Margery and had a flat in a two-story block. The intercom didn't work and the door on the stairwell hung loosely. The stairwells smelt of wee, so I held my breath till I got to the top where it opened out onto a balcony.

It was the end of December. I was all wrapped up in my coat and hat, carrying a brown leather bag heavy with my bible and Watchtowers. I was glad my school friends didn't live round here; I was terrified of them seeing me. I didn't know many of the kids down Duchy Road; they went to a different high school. They would watch, clustered around a lamp post, as if we were a side show, occasionally calling something out as we knocked on the doors. Only last week when I showed a neighbour *The Watchtower*, he said: 'Let me tell you something, darling. You should be getting out and having some fun.' I stared at him as if he was crazy.

Margery was a return visit of John's. She took *The Watchtower* every month and invited us in for a chat and a brew. The first time he asked me to accompany him on the call I was shocked at how her cheek bones pierced through her skin and her shoulders stuck out like bent coat-hangers under her dressing gown. She was tall and had brittle, red hair wrapped around her head like a turban. She looked pleased to see us. I think she was won over by John's manners; he spoke like he was out of a black and white film. We sat on her faded floral couch. I traced my glove over a stain and tried to breathe through my mouth; her flat smelt of stale cigarettes and beer and something rank.

Margery perched on the other chair and flicked through the magazine. *A World Without War* was printed on a picture of a mushroom cloud set against a barren landscape. John asked her whether she thought a world without war was possible.

'Oh, I don't know,' she said. 'Haven't really thought about it. But it would be nice, wouldn't it?'

She looked at the contents page and muttered: 'Armageddon: The War to End All Wars', 'The Scrolls of Revelation', then placed it on the chair and turned to point to framed photos of two men in uniform on the wall behind her.



‘That’s my son, Martin,’ she said. ‘And that’s my ex-husband, Jimmy, he’s dead now. They’re both in the armed forces, you know.’

John peered over his glasses at the photos. Margery twisted in her chair and her shoulders began to shake. She looked ill, ghostly; her skin was paper thin, like an old woman’s. I couldn’t tell how old she was.

‘Do you want some tea?’ she asked and walked to her kitchen. She was the thinnest person I had ever seen. I peered round her room, at the white bumpy wallpaper, peeling and yellowed with mould spreading in the corners. Books were piled on shelves, thrillers, Ruth Rendells; novels my mum got from Height library. There was a wedding photo of a young woman with long red hair in a wedding dress holding onto the arm of a man in uniform.

‘Karen, do you want to see if she needs any help?’

‘OK.’

I tiptoed into the kitchen. ‘Do you need any help?’ I asked. She was pouring vodka into a mug. ‘Here you are,’ she said, handing me a mug on the side. ‘I don’t have any milk, though.’

‘That’s OK. I can’t drink milk.’

She smiled at me. The mug was wobbling in her hands. There was probably an article on alcoholism in a back copy of *The Watchtower*, with good advice. I’d look through my magazines when I got home.

We sipped our tea and John took out his bible and showed her Matthew 24: 6-8, while she squinted and followed the words with her finger. ‘And you shall hear of wars, and reports of wars, but do not be troubled, for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom and against kingdom, and there shall be famines and earthquakes and pestilences in many places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.’

‘There’s more?’ she said.

‘But look,’ John said, pointing to verse 14: ‘And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then the end shall come.’

I was thinking we could perhaps help her, make her some dinner, when there was a knock at the door. ‘Margery!’

‘It’s Sid,’ she said and hobbled to the hall.

Sid was a gnarled-looking man, even shorter than me, and sinewy. He had Co-op bags of cans and I could see the words 'Special Brew' through the plastic.

'This is my friend, Sid,' she said. 'This is John and his friend, what's your name, love?'

'Karen.'

'Karen.'

She showed him her copy of *The Watchtower* and he raised his eyebrows and coughed. John must have felt awkward because he said it was time to be going.

A month after my first visit to Margery's flat, John's wife was ill. He asked me to call on Margery and said to take a sister called Joan because I wasn't supposed to go into people's houses on my own. When we arrived, Margery was wearing the same pink dressing gown. She staggered as she walked and said, 'Come into the kitchen, dear.' Joan was left perching on the couch.

Margery leaned on the kitchen counter and said, 'You're not like them round here.'

I heard that a lot, but it bugged me. I wasn't sure why.

Margery made the tea; she squeezed the teabag against the cup until the water turned dark tan. Then she poured in lots of milk and passed it to me. I didn't like to mention that I didn't drink milk, so I clasped it in my hands.

She said, 'I've been thinking about what John asked. And no, I don't think a world without war is possible. Look around you. There's no end to it.' She pointed around her kitchen, as if the evidence was in here. Then she eased herself on to a wooden chair and said, 'Let me tell you something.'

The mug was burning my fingers. I needed to put it down, so I tried to make room for it among the dirty glasses on the counter.

'I'll tell you something,' Margery said again. 'My husband died.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'Yes. I know you are love. That's why you do what you do. Well he was my ex-husband. I met him here, you know. Down Duchy Road. His aunt lived next door.'

'What was he like?'

'Sit down,' she said, so I sat on the hard chair. She leaned against the side. 'He was dashing in his uniform,' she said. 'Like in the photo.' She took a sip from her mug. 'When he came to visit his aunt, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I leaned over the little wall that



separated our front yards, blowing pink bubbles. He smiled as he knocked on the door. He had a lovely smile. Then his aunt opened the door. She gushed over him, 'Jimmy, oh Jimmy. Just look at you!'

I waited outside, leaning and swinging on the gate, trying to hear what was happening. After a while, he came out and lit a cigarette.

'I was a looker then. My hair was long and a brilliant red, like it was out of a bottle. But it wasn't. I did this thing, see.' Margery dipped her head forward. 'And it would fall over my face. Worked every time.'

The next day I leant on the gate till he came out and I did the thing with my hair and he invited me for dinner with the family. I'd never been to dinner before. They had the roast all spread out like a king was visiting, and he sat at the head and carved the beef. His hand stroked my back as he passed me to get some glasses. It was like we were a couple.

That evening he asked me to go to South Carolina with him. We got married in the registrar's on Albert Square, and then we flew to the States. I'd never been in a plane before. We went to visit his family in South Carolina. They were well off, very posh. Not like the ones down our way, and weren't pleased with him marrying me. But we didn't care.' Margery had another drink from her mug and I tried the tea, but the milk tasted awful.

'We lived on post at Fort Bradley,' she said. 'We had our own quarters, all the married ones did. Two rooms. A bedroom and living room with a small kitchenette. We loved it and when we arrived we waltzed around the bed,' Margery said, smiling and doing a waltzing movement with her arms. Then she poured some vodka into her mug. 'But it didn't last,' she said. 'I wasn't cut out to be an army wife. The other wives were like they'd been trained. Sacrifice and chin up and all that. In our house, my mam didn't take any jip.'

I'll tell you this love, I've always liked a drink. Who doesn't? And I was so bleeding bored, I didn't want to spend my afternoons at tea parties. One day, it must have been three months in, I tried to go off base. The guard at the gate asked where I was going and for what reason. I said I had errands. He kept questioning me. Could I not get what I needed from the store on base?

I said I needed womanly things, which shut him up. I went to a bar in the town and ordered a whisky. Only one! On the way back, I picked up a bottle of Jim Bean. But at the gate, the guard searched my bags and found it. Jimmy was called down. When we got home, he closed the door behind him and said, "Margery, you're a drunk. I can smell it on

your breath.” And I’d only had one. He looked at the bottle in his hand. “I’m gonna teach you a lesson, sweetheart.” He pulled my head back by my hair and poured it over my face, forced my mouth open and tipped the whisky down my throat till I was choking. It went in my eyes and nose. I coughed and choked. I broke away from him and locked myself in the bathroom.

Two months later, I realised I was pregnant. Jimmy was away a lot for field training in the next few months and when he got home he wanted a proper welcome. But I was so tired with the pregnancy I wasn’t able to do all the cleaning and cooking. That made him mad. When I was about eight months pregnant I remember I was having a brew on the couch with my feet up, when he got in. I tried to get up to say hello, but I was a beached whale. He said, “Look at the state of you. Can’t you make an effort?”

I said, “I’m making a bleedin’ effort.”

We were supposed to be going to a dinner party at a lieutenant’s quarters. But I couldn’t face it. The wives. The chat. So I said I didn’t feel well.

“Get your lazy ass up and dressed,” he said.

“No thanks.”

“Do you want a reason not to go?”

I knew what was coming, but I was stuck on the couch so I couldn’t get away. Not that it made any difference. He was a big man.

“Don’t think you can stay home and drink,” he said. “I’ll give you a reason to stay home.” Then he smashed a glass over my head.’

Margery pointed to a thin scar coming out of her hairline.

‘I didn’t go to the party,’ she said. She felt the scar with her fingers and then eased herself onto the other chair. ‘There was something wrong with Jimmy’s head. A switch would click and he’d go into these rages. It got worse and worse. Not with Martin. He never touched Martin. But I couldn’t do anything right.

When Martin was two or three, the army chaplain visited. Lovely man, he was. I ended up telling him about Jimmy. I remember him touching the bruise on my arm and saying he would help me. He did, you know. He told them, but the army wouldn’t have any of it. They look after their own.’ Margery stood and picked up a tea-towel, looking at the cups on the sink.

‘What happened?’ I asked.



‘In the end, I had enough. I tried to divorce Jimmy. He claimed I was an alcoholic, so he and his family got custody of Martin. I had no money so I moved back here.’

I didn’t know what to say, so I got out *The Watchtower* and passed it to her. It seemed fitting because there was an article called: ‘Domestic Violence: What is God’s View?’ Then I realised Joan was at the door and she said, ‘My husband was violent too. It took me years to leave him.’ She surprised me because she didn’t talk to Margery about *The Watchtower* and I never knew that about Jean. I thought she’d always lived alone with her three dogs.

Margery nodded. ‘They’re not all like John are they?’

We agreed. Not many like John, whose wife’s dialysis machine was in a shed in the garden and he hooked her up to it every week.

Margery looked at *The Watchtower* and placed it in her lap. ‘Is John coming again?’ she asked, her voice brightening.

‘He should be.’

We returned twice after that. She didn’t mention her husband again. During our visits she seemed interested and chatty for a while, but the last time I visited she flopped heavily on the sofa. Her skin was waxy and she smelt of sick. She picked up her mug and stared at us, glassy-eyed and as John was speaking, she fell asleep. We sat there and I said, ‘Is she OK?’ Then she snuggled herself into the cushion and began to snore. There was a pink blanket on the other chair, so I placed it over her knee. John whispered, ‘I think we should go.’ We crept out of the door and John said, ‘It’s a shame.’

The final time we called we knocked and even tapped on her window, but she didn’t answer the door. The curtains were drawn, though we could hear someone inside. Then a couple of weeks later, I was on my way to the Co-op, at the top of Duchy Road. I was on my own and wasn’t on the ministry. I thought I could get her something. When I called at her flat, the windows and door were boarded up and someone had already graffitied on them. There was no one there. No one at all.

## Lebensborn

Hanna was exhausted. She had risen at five to take the train from Oslo Central Station to Gardermoen airport. The plane had been delayed, her face felt puffy and her feet were balloons. No matter how she adjusted her long skirt, she could not hide them. But still, if Kari, her mother, were sitting beside her on this flight, there was only one thing Hanna would have asked her.

Hanna hadn't opened the book yet. She'd studied the hardback brown cover and traced the ridiculous title with her finger for most of the flight. Kari had publicised her life, sold her diary to another Nazi sensationalist book: *Horizontal Collaboration: Gender and Politics in Post-War Norway*, even if it had the veneer of academia. Hanna didn't trust academia. She had her ex-husband to thank for that.

She eased her heel out of her court shoe. It relieved the pinch, but if she took her shoes off she'd never get them back on. The young girl next to her was wearing battered trainers. What did her mother wear when she was young? Probably high heels to attract the soldiers. The awful academic Dr Grieg Overland-Knudsen had worn red pumps, which had matched her died henna hair. She had been full of condolences at Kari's funeral, but was clearly still annoyed that Hanna had declined to contribute to her study.

The air hostess held out a bin bag, so Hanna passed her the empty coffee cup. She had stared at the cover long enough. She pushed her glasses up her nose, opened the book till she heard a crack in the bind and found the section on her mother. There were photos of a diary, of brown crinkled notepaper and swirly handwriting and then there were translated excerpts in English. Here were her mother's words, in bald, black print.

**May 13<sup>th</sup> 1944**

I met someone today.

The streets of Oslo were packed. We were on Karl Johan's Gate. There was one of the German parades going by, so we had to stand and cheer. Men crowded in shop doors, some waving their caps, others folding their arms and staring. Some lads didn't wave and got a ticking off from a sergeant on the side of the road. One started arguing with him and



was knocked to the ground. I strained to look, but the crowd pressed us towards the front. The music was stirring, almost joyous. It made my heart catch. I don't know why.

I was waving my handkerchief when one of the passing German soldiers swivelled his head and looked straight into my eyes and winked. I jumped. It was as if a marching doll had come to life. Then he was gone, his back disappearing into the rows of the parade.

'Did you see that?' I said.

Later, we were walking home and he was there again. He appeared on a corner. Perhaps he had followed us. He walked over and said 'Hello,' though his pronunciation was terrible. My hands were bare and red from the cold. He said he would take me out and give me some gloves and ten pounds of potatoes, if I liked. My stomach jumped at the sound of the potatoes. It was probably my stomach answering, my stomach that said yes.

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The plane was landing, but Hanna kept reading. In the photo with the other Norwegian women who had participated in the study, Kari was classically dressed, like a model in an old knitting magazine: straight wool skirt, cashmere cardigan, pearl buttons. Her hair was long and curled. It was still blonde, just faded with age. Kari and the other women looked very tall. But why would the women be small? They had wanted good genes.

Hanna braced herself for the landing, closing her eyes as the plane jumped on the runway. She peered through the porthole at Manchester Airport's terminal. She felt warmer already. She was going to have to face her daughter. Mary was twenty-seven, a high school teacher with, Hanna thought, a booming, strident voice that reverberated through crowds, walls, and teenager's skulls.

'What do you mean you knew she was ill?' Mary had screeched, slamming the car at the lights. 'She. Had. Cancer. And you didn't say anything? You just ignored it?'

'I didn't ignore it. Don't you dare criticize me,' Hanna had said, pulling her skirt over her knees. 'You don't understand.'

'Don't I? Nothing can compete with your sacrosanct pain, can it?'

Mary slammed her foot on the accelerator.

At twenty Hanna had been brave; she had saved up her money in Oslo for a flight to London, where she'd found a waitressing job and lived in a poky Bed and Breakfast that

took all her wages. When she walked home at the dead of night, she had stuffed her hands in her mac pockets. In her room, perching on the narrow bed, she'd eat soup from a tin. Then, one night, Thomas came into the restaurant with a group of friends. He'd been to the theatre to see Ibsen. When he heard her accent he asked her what she thought of *Hedda Gabler*. She blushed. She'd heard of it, but she hadn't seen it. 'You should,' Thomas said, as he sipped his wine. 'I'll take you.'

She always was his project. She had soon realized that despite his love of Ibsen's plays about women, she'd always been a little doll to him.

That moment stuck in her mind. Thomas offering to take her, this unknown, foreign waitress, to the theatre in front of his friends; he'd stood up, as if he was a gallant knight and taken the dishes from her. His friends thought this was uproarious, but the manager had stood tight-lipped as Thomas swept past and dumped them on the nearest surface in the kitchen, and then sauntered back as if he had broken some unspoken rule.

A few months later she had moved into a flat with Thomas and his two friends who were completing their theses. They had lived 'in sin' for a year. If sin was a place you inhabited, hers was a dirty flat with brown and orange wallpaper and mice.

'You'll turn out like your mother,' her grandmother used to say to her. 'Just the same.'

**May 14<sup>th</sup> 1944**

He took me to Theatercafeen! It was all sumptuous brocade and silver cutlery, though even this restaurant looked a little threadbare. I was all spruced up - hair curled, the last of my lipstick worked into my lips and charcoal darkening my eyebrows. He was in his uniform, with a bulging satchel.

He opened the satchel to show me the potatoes. I gasped. It was as though he had given me a bunch of roses, only potatoes were better than roses. Then he got out the gloves and I could have died. They were made of soft cream leather. I put them on, but they were a little too small. I felt like one of Cinderella's ugly sisters and that I'd have to cut off my fingers to make them fit. But he didn't seem to notice. He was looking at the menu.

'There's not much to order,' he said. 'We will have the fish soup. You need fattening up.'



We had beer with the food. It was watery, but strong for me, since I haven't had any beer in years! I asked him about his home. He said he was from a small town in the Black Forest. He had a large family. All his brothers were in the army, and his sisters were left being farmers. They were very strong and his mother said that they worked better than the boys.

We laughed at this.

Barend is very thin and I imagined his sisters opening barn doors for him.

He walked me home and left me at the end of my road. My mother was waiting at the window and saw us, but said nothing when I walked in the kitchen.

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Hanna closed the book and buttoned up her coat. A tall blonde couple stood up in the seats in front of her. They had to bend over, their heads brushing the overhead lockers. The woman had the long fine blonde hair of Hanna's mother and grandmother. Hanna felt her own, dark bob. Even when they were old, their hair was still blonde, whereas Hanna's dark hair had sprung grey hairs at thirty. She still coloured it. She stood up and squeezed down the aisle behind the tall couple.

If Hanna had a diary she would have to write, 'I missed my mother's funeral.' When the solicitor had contacted her with the date for Kari's funeral, she'd sat at the bottom of the stairs and then caught a plane to Oslo. She had arrived in Oslo late at night and crept out of the Gardemoen airport as if she was hiding from someone. The taxi was extortionate, everything in Norway was extortionate. She had huddled in the backseat and stared at the passing roads, the people spilling out of bars along Prinsens Gate. She was a stranger here. A tourist.

Hanna had booked into the first hotel she could find, a business one on Rosenkrantz Gate, and paid for it too. She'd sat in her hotel room, shaking, then made herself a vodka from the mini bar. She drank it on the hotel bed with its crisp white sheets and rubbed her aching calves. Then she'd had another and another to try to ease the anxiety in her stomach. She lay back, thinking she was in for another sleepless night, but in the morning she woke with the light on and her cardigan twisted around her. She had got up from the hotel bed feeling stiff and grubby. She showered and changed into a black suit, which pinched her waist. She left the top button of her skirt undone. The black made her look

tired, so she quickly did her face, not looking too closely in the mirror under the harsh bathroom light.

‘*Vestre Gruvlund*, vaer sa snill,’ she’d said to the driver, the words awkward and strange on her lips. She was forgetting her own language. ‘What’s Norwegian for “fridge” mum?’ Mary used to ask. ‘Why won’t you speak it? I could be fluent, bilingual, but you won’t speak it.’

There were road works on *Sorkiedalsvelen* and the taxi then took her to what turned out to be the entrance to the old part of the cemetery. She was late and there was no one to ask for directions. She began to walk towards the graves, as if she was drawn to them. The rows of grey, crumbling headstones spread out before her. She could make out dates. 1892, 1905. These graves were neglected now; no flowers. Her grandparents had been cremated. They had small plaques in a section near the crematorium, but Kari had opted for the full works. The bunch of carnations Hanna had bought at the airport was still perky and bright. In the distance she could see newer graves. From somewhere there was the sound of the digger chugging up earth.

There was another funeral happening at the newer graves, where there was still flat grass to be dug up and filled. A woman was throwing flowers into the hole, and the group of people stood in silence. She continued walking. She should find the office, ask someone, but all she could do was walk. The grave must be here somewhere. Perhaps they had gone now.

She ventured onto the grass, her heels sticking in the earth. Where was she? She could not even see the entrance and office anymore. The cemetery stretched out around her. It seemed as if there was nothing in the world but this cemetery. Then she tiptoed up another path and saw the entrance in the distance. By the time she reached the door her shoes were caked in mud and she was gasping for breath.

Inside, she placed her hands on the desk and said to the woman in English, ‘I can’t find the funeral.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I can’t find my mother’s funeral. I don’t know where it is. I’m lost.’

‘What’s the name?’

‘Kari Orheik’

‘I think they have finished. But here, I’ll take you.’



She drove Hanna in a buggy, like ones Hanna had seen on golf courses, to where her mother's coffin lay in the ground. The funeral party had gone and Hanna was left to throw the carnations into the hole while the woman waited a few feet away.

At passport control, Hanna had Norwegian and British passports in her handbag, but she handed over the British one, in which her name was Hanna Johnson not Hanna Orheik. In her British passport she was not a visitor. The man in the booth hardly glanced at it and sent her through. The tall couple ahead looked like tourists. They laughed and he slung his arm around her waist.

**May 18<sup>th</sup> 1944**

I felt a little delirious walking home. Another German soldier called out to me and followed me down the street. I don't know what he said, but I ignored him. I felt untouchable, almost euphoric after what had just happened.

Mother stared at me as if it was stamped on my forehead. She circled me in the kitchen, eyeing me up and down.

'Where have you been?'

'Nowhere.'

She got a cloth and rubbed it across my face, smearing the charcoal and lipstick. Then she dragged me to the sink and scrubbed my lips with a brush.

'You've been with him, haven't you? A German soldier. You know what they'll call you? A Nazi's whore.'

I am writing this in the dark, feeling the page with my hands. My lips are raw and bleeding and my chin and cheeks are sore.

My sister is snoring across the room. Loud, raucous snores, as if she is laughing in her sleep. She had tiptoed round the kitchen when all this was going on, tidying, wiping her hands on her pinny; doing her impression of a good daughter.

Today we didn't go for lunch. He took me to an apartment, where bread and ham and beer were laid out on the dressing table. The bread was reflected in the mirror and behind it

there was me, stark and pale in my red lipstick. There was ice on the windows and the room was even colder than my room at home.

Next to the ham he placed a packet of stockings. I gasped and then covered my mouth, as if I'd hiccupped. Picking them up, I said, 'They're beautiful.' The stockings were so exquisite I could hardly touch them. I folded my arms across my chest to keep warm and he poured the beer. Really I wanted tea, something hot. I wanted to be in a steamy cafe where there wasn't a neatly made bed. I drank the watery beer and we nibbled the bread. It was the best bread I'd had in years.

He talked, but I can't remember what he said now as he stroked my hair. Then he put down our beers and led me to the bed. The cover looked clean, so I supposed that was a good thing. I'm not sure whether I wanted it or not. I must have; I stayed there and let him undress me like I was a doll. It was as if I could not stop what was happening. I was almost outside of myself, unable to move.

And I didn't want to disappoint him.

I undid my boots and slid under the cold sheet.

---

*German whore. Nazi spawn. Tyskertoser. Tyskerunger. Naziyngel.*

'Naziyngel' Hanna muttered. 'Tyskerunger.' She'd not forgotten those words. They were spat at her in the playground.

Hanna was at the baggage collection. Suitcases went past on the belt. She couldn't remember what hers looked like. Brown? Beige? *Naziyngel*. And her husband, no ex-husband, wondered why she had what he called a 'persecution complex.'

She had made sure Mary did not know the word, or grew up with the shame. Mary had wanted to come to the funeral. She'd pulled her long blonde hair back and said in her teacher voice, 'I'll come with you.'

'No, I'm better on my own.'

'She's my grandmother.'

Mary had her grandmother's looks and height. She was 5'10 when she was thirteen and Hanna found it difficult to hug such an overgrown daughter. Mary had turned into such a bossy madam since Hanna's divorce. 'Mum, why don't you join the singles bingo club? Here's an advert for art classes. Look!' Hanna had looked through the leaflets and placed



them on the table. But there was no remedy for waking in the night, panicking; the duvet flat and neat where it should be rumpled and full of Thomas.

Hanna checked her phone, but Mary hadn't texted. 5pm. She'd be preparing for her teaching on Monday.

No one else from the family had come to Kari's wake. Hanna had known they would not come. She had caught another overpriced taxi from the cemetery to a nearby hotel. The other mourners were women like her mother, going by their height, bloneness and age. There was a community, a club of them. There was also a community of *Lebensborn* children. War children. She'd not wanted anything to do with that either. A stand with copies of the book was on the opposite side of the room to the table of food. There it was: *Horizontal Collaboration: Patriotism and Gender in Post-War Norway*. There were also flowers for Kari, with a photo of her when she was young in a skirt suit and smiling at the camera. Hanna stood with her glass of sparkling water and clenched her hands. She felt short and frumpy next to everybody. If the *Lebensborn* thing had worked, she would not have been suitable. Kari had been nearly six feet. No wonder they chose her.

The academic woman, Grieg Overland-Knudsen, strode over, her bracelets jingling. She was even shorter than Hanna, and spoke in a breathless, excited way. 'You're Kari's daughter!' she exclaimed. 'I knew you were when you came in.' She gave Hanna a free copy of the book and asked how she was doing. Had Hanna applied for compensation from the Norwegian government?

'I'm not doing that,' Hanna said.

The woman stared at her, in her patronising manner. 'You should,' she said.

Thinking of it irritated Hanna even now. Grieg had acted as if it was a book launch, not a funeral.

There was her small beige suitcase. As it passed, she heaved it off the belt and onto the floor. The shrill of the alarm made Hanna jump. People around her paused. Perhaps it would stop in a moment. But it continued to shrill. Fire? Bomb? The belt came to a halt and passengers shoved past each other to reach their stranded bags.

'What about my bags?' a suited man exclaimed. 'How am I going to get my bag now?'

At least Hanna had her suitcase. She extended the handle and dragged it towards customs. As passengers rushed to the exit, they pushed past and someone knocked the handle from her grasp. She tried to turn to pick up the suitcase, but she was driven forwards.

**April 1<sup>st</sup> 1944**

Lying in bed, he said my hair was pure, as if it was light itself.

I laughed as he pulled out a strand and held it up to the light.

‘You are a goddess,’ he said. He wanted to know about my family. Who were my grandparents, even my great- grandparents. Were they all Norwegian? What did they look like? Were they tall and blonde like me?

I said they were. Purely Norwegian. Were his family all German?

Of course they were. He had pure German blood.

I didn’t want to tell him my great, great grandmother had disgraced the family by marrying a gypsy. He’d disappeared though and he was erased from the records. My grandmother told me about him once.

Barend looked me over then, assessing me. You need more meat, he said, to fatten you up. Then he slapped my thigh and laughed like a hearty butcher.

The other girls, they rate the presents and the restaurants when half the country is starving. They don’t mention the stares, the long glances and the old women who spit on the ground when they pass.

But Barend is different. He said the reason he was put on this earth was to meet me and he was going to take me back to Germany. But I’m not sure I want to go.

Barend asked me if I loved him and I didn’t know what to say. When I day dream I see us as lovers. I feel far from my family, from everybody, as if he has filled up the air around me. I wait all day for him to come and see me, and when I think of him I flush. That must be what my mother sees when she says, ‘You’re seeing him aren’t you?’

---

In arrivals, the main doors were opened. People screamed and struggled to get out. The crowd surged towards the doors, the alarm still shrilling. Hanna was squeezed through the



doors, and there was the blessed relief of fresh air. She stood and clutched her handbag. People spilled out of the other terminal doors. How would she get her luggage back? Should she wait around? No. It was best to get home. Phone up later. She'd walk down the road and try to get a taxi.

### **August 1<sup>st</sup> 1944**

Mother stood in the kitchen and said, 'Have I raised you for this?' From the doorway father shouted, 'For what? To be an enemy to Norway?' He strode over and raised his hand, but mother said, 'Don't. Not in her condition.'

'What does that matter?' he said.

'Listen, Kari,' my mother said. 'The Germans are here now. But what about the future? The only thing we can do is hope they lose, and you go making your bed with one.'

'I'm not an enemy of Norway,' I said. 'Neither is Barend.'

'Barend,' my father said. 'Barend, Barend. Everything is Barend.'

I ran upstairs to my room and sat on my bed, shaking.

### **August 15<sup>rd</sup> 1944**

I'm not allowed out now I'm showing. Mother says it's too dangerous. I feel heavy and sick. I stay in my room and watch the people walking past the window. I think about Barend and wonder if I know him at all. But then I imagine him kissing me and how he'd tried to pick me up to carry me across the hotel room, but I was too tall and he stumbled and we fell on the bed. I think about how I liked to place my hand on his chest, run it over his jacket and shirt and then undo a couple of buttons and slip my hand inside to feel the muscle and wiry hairs. Then I'd unbutton his shirt and he'd lean over and his whole body would go taut.

I don't know him really. Perhaps it's because we never understand each other! His Norwegian is poor and my German is bad. When I speak in German he says my accent makes me sound adorable, like a little girl.

### **September 1<sup>st</sup> 1944**

Barend came by the house late at night and asked to see me. My parents didn't want to let him in, but he said he would bring officers. I was being rescued. He is my St Hallvard. I just hope we don't die together. But I was in my nightgown, so I quickly dressed and came downstairs. He said he was worried about me and that I should go into a special maternity hospital. I'd get the best care. 'There's even fresh fruit,' he said,

'If anyone hurts you,' he said. 'There will be consequences.'

Why would anyone hurt me?

---

Outside Terminal 2, Hanna had to walk to the roundabouts that led to the motorway to find a taxi. There were others with the same idea. When a taxi came right around the roundabout and stopped in front of them a woman said, 'Would anyone like to share a taxi?' Five people fitted in, and Hanna sat in the front.

'I lost my luggage,' one said.

'Was it a bomb?'

'A fire,' a business man said. 'I'm sure of it. There was smoke coming from one of the buildings.'

'I wouldn't mind turning round and having a look at what's happening,' someone said.

### **September 15<sup>th</sup> 1944**

The maternity home is a converted manor house, where rich people once lived. It's like a very clean hotel, all crisp and neat and white, as if all the germs have been ordered to stay at the door, where the German soldiers wipe their boots.

Barend brought me. He held my bag and my hand. But I had to settle in on my own. I have my own room and the nurses are worse than my mother. I can see other girls and hear them walking down the corridor, but we are not encouraged to talk to each other. Though we are all here for the same reason, we are alone and solitary. I tried tapping on my wall, but laughed at myself and gave up.

I can only write in my diary under the cover of night. A nurse asked what I was writing and I said it was a letter to my mother. She said letters were not allowed. She tried



to take it off me, but I put on my poshest voice – the one I use in shops – and said not to worry I would dispose of the letter. I thought right. I'm going to write to mother now. We have hardly spoken in weeks.

**November 15<sup>th</sup> 1944**

We have to eat toast and porridge for breakfast. The nurses say it is Himmler's orders. How strange a big general worrying about what we have for breakfast.

Barend comes to see me every day. He brings fruit, flowers and little bars of chocolate. He said he'd bring me cigarettes but he isn't allowed. He is very proud, as if he has accomplished something great. He patted my stomach, which is huge now, and said 'How is the Reich's child? How is our Lebensborn?'

'What's Lebensborn?' I asked.

'Born free,' he said. 'In the New World.'

'I want to go home,' I said.

'But you're safe here. You'll get the best treatment here.'

'Do you love me?' I asked.

'Of course I do.'

'I want to go home.' I began to cry.

'You will have to have the baby here. Do you understand?'

A nurse came and gave me a tablet and then I slept. When I woke in the night, I felt hazy.

---

Hanna was the last in the taxi. It had dropped others off in Didsbury and the city centre before coming down the Crescent, past the University where Thomas used to work, to the Heights. The taxi turned off Bolton Road onto King's Road. It was raining outside, but she was nearly home. She felt the judder of the speed bumps and looked to see if the Heights library was open. She still liked to go there, even though there were hardly any books she hadn't read. Then she turned onto Godfrey Road, with its semi-detached houses. 'Just here

is fine,' she said to the driver. 'Thirty quid,' he said. She had a handful of money from everybody. It was more than that, so she gave it all to him.

She dashed into the house. Letters and newspapers were piled behind the door. Bills, some junk mail for Thomas, which she stuffed in the 'Thomas's letters' box. Seeing his name still made her chest constrict, even after three years. He'd been her rock, the one thing she had to help her settle, to belong.

The house had a funny, unlived in smell, though she had only been away for three days. She closed the door behind her and leaving the mail, she hurried through to the living room. She turned on the TV. The BBC news channel was reporting from the airport. 'A fire has devastated terminal 2. The cause of the fire is yet unknown, but it is thought to have come from the Short Term Holding Centre. There are no known deaths.

In the images smoke rose from the buildings. That was her suitcase gone then. No point phoning the airport now.

She should call Mary. But all her energy seemed to have left her. She lay back on the couch and closed her eyes. She shook off her shoes and then sat up to reach for her bag. There was the book.

### **1<sup>st</sup> December 1944**

They brought the baby. It had a shock of dark hair and a red screwed-up face.

'That's not mine,' I said.

The nurse put it into a cot and said, 'I'm afraid you'll have to leave.'

'Where's Barend?' I asked. But she did not answer. I was told I had to go home now and take my child with me. I kept saying it wasn't mine, but they wouldn't listen.

I was still weak and sore, but I dressed and walked like a crab. I had to carry the baby out of the hospital in my arms. She cried and cried. It was a long way home and I had to rest on the road.

When I arrived home, mother and father were standing in the kitchen. They said nothing. But then my sister came over and stared at the baby. I dumped it in her arms and struggled upstairs.

'Isn't it blonde enough for them?' father shouted.



15<sup>th</sup> March 1945

My sister is looking after the baby. She carries it around, cooing and making baby noises as if it is hers.

I can't bear to look at it. I tried to feed her, but it hurts. There is a small amount of milk powder, but it's not much.

There was a news broadcast from the Norwegian government in Britain, warning against collaboration. I went downstairs to listen to the radio that father had hidden when the Germans searched the house. The broadcaster said something about women who had not shown restraint, but mother switched it off.

8th May 1945

The allies have arrived and the Germans are fleeing. The neighbours are celebrating in the street, waving the Norwegian flag and dancing around and linking arms. Mother took down the black-out paper. I hid from the window. I should feel glad, but I don't.

I don't know what has happened to Barend. Perhaps he was sent back to Germany. Other German soldiers walked out of buildings with their hands in the air apparently. Many are going back on boats. Will he contact me now? Can he?

There is a change in the air. Everybody is cursing the Germans.

---

The same information kept being repeated on the news, so Hanna switched it off.

It was odd to think that she was the baby described in the diary. Kari seems ambivalent. *The baby is thin and weak...There is nothing to feed her... Now the war is over, I hope there will be milk.* You'd think that her sister would keep Hanna, but she doesn't. Hanna knows that for a fact. She gets married and that's the last of her attention.

*I hope Barend escaped on a boat.*

Hanna felt sick when she read this. Kari was so naïve, so hopeful. Hanna had asked the academic at the funeral. 'Do you know what happened to my father?' she said as they nibbled pieces of rye bread with herring. They were next to the stand the woman had made of her book.

‘I looked into it for Kari,’ the woman said. ‘Kari wanted to know after all these years. I believe he didn’t make it home. Many of the retreating German ships were bombed.’

But the question Hanna had wanted to ask was why did she leave me?

**15<sup>th</sup> May 1945**

I was washing sheets when they came. Mother answered the door, and I heard her say sharply, ‘What do you want?’

They did not reply. I heard the door bang as they threw it back and they were clumping inside, and I wondered if my mother was still thinking that they were getting dirt on the floor. I knew what they wanted, so I ran out the back door and into the garden. I could make it over the wall, but a man said, ‘Kari Orheik.’ I turned and there were people from our road, the local shop, and the magistrates.

‘Guilty as sin,’ a woman from down the road said. She walked over and grabbed my arms. She looked into my eyes, satisfied.

A truck was waiting out the front. They opened the back and inside were women huddled on the floor. Their clothes were torn and one was crying. They pushed me up and into the truck.

I sat on the floor and hugged my knees. The sickness I had felt ever since the war had ended, and the allies had retaken Oslo, built up in my stomach and I thought I might vomit. I looked at the others. ‘Where are we going?’ I asked. One shrugged. A small, pale blonde girl said, ‘I don’t know.’ One had bruises over her face, a deep purple on her cheek. They stopped and more girls were forced into the truck. One was heavily pregnant and lay on the floor. Another stroked her forehead. ‘It will be OK,’ she said.

‘Why are we here?’ one asked. ‘What did we do?’

We drove in silence, swaying as the truck turned corners. There was no St Hallvard for us, no one to try to rescue us and die trying. Eventually the truck stopped and the doors opened. ‘Get out,’ a man said. We all stood up and climbed out of the truck. The pregnant girl struggled. We had to help her; the man just stood and watched.

I looked round and saw we were in the Market square. There were crowds, all the way back. The people filled the square, as if there was a German parade. They were quiet, watching. The Nazi flags had been torn down and was one left burning on a pole.

I can hardly bear to write this. I keep scratching and tearing at the page.



We were made to stand in a line. I was in the middle and I don't know what was worse, being up front not knowing what was going to happen, or further back waiting for it. They took a girl, and I knew her face from the maternity home. A woman on each side gripped her arms and held her up as another cut at her hair. Her legs gave way so another had to help hold her up. The scissors were large dressmaker's scissors. If they had been careful they could have saved it to make a wig. But they cut violently, catching the girl's scalp and ears. She was crying and struggling. One held the scissors to her neck and then she was quiet. Behind them was the old statue. I kept my eyes on it as the other girls had their hair cut and were dragged into another line to be tied one to the other.

All through this people jeered. Old women, young men, ones I'd once walked round the square with. They shouted and there was a roaring in my ears, as if I was underwater. The girl next to me bent over and wailed. Behind us, the pregnant girl had been left on the ground. I don't know what happened to her. The rest of us were dragged in a line through the crowds.

*Tystertoser*, they shouted. *Tyskertoser*.

---

The diary ended here. There was a note saying that Kari was incarcerated for two years in a labour camp. After that she fled to the countryside.

'She left you,' Hanna's grandmother had said. 'Abandoned you.'

But who had put Hanna in the home? Her grandmother always said it was Kari. She looked through the other stories. Other children had been taken off their mothers by the authorities and placed in homes and mental hospitals. These stories were worse, much worse than hers. Perhaps it hadn't been Kari after all.

Her first memories were of the home. She got up and looking around for some paper. There was a notebook and biro beside the phone. The notebook was small, but it would do. She picked up the pen, rubbed it on the paper until it worked and then began to write:

*I don't remember much of the home I grew up in. We weren't taught anything. There were five of us in a room and we thought we were sisters, but we weren't. I remember the darkness of the long corridor and knowing I shouldn't cry. I was always*

*cold and hugged my knees in bed. We had a day room where there were a few toys. We were left in there and every afternoon we played outside.*

*And then one day an old woman came and told me she was my grandmother and I was going to live with her now. But she smelt funny and my bed was cold there too. I was eight but I could not spell or count. At the school, they said I was a slow learner, and inherently stupid because I was Nazi spawn, but I had never been taught anything. I was called names and I often got sick and I was glad not to go. My grandmother let me stay home with her and I liked helping her in the kitchen. She did not speak of my mother, who had gone to live elsewhere, where no one knew her.*

Hanna put the pen down. It was no good. It was too long ago now. She did not know how to write it. She'd get the fire going, have a bath, check the news. But then she thought of her grandmother, and saw her in the kitchen, making one of her fish stews. Her arms were strong and hard, not soft; she was steely. Her blonde hair was waist length and the only time Hanna touched her grandmother was when the older woman got Hanna to brush her hair. Hanna loved it and made sure she did it just right, starting near the bottom in short strokes to get the knots out and moving upwards till she did long, sure strokes down her back. Strands would fly up in the static.

*'My mother was never spoken about, as if she didn't exist. But as I got older my grandmother compared me to her whenever I did something wrong. I remember trying to go out of the house in lipstick when I was fourteen. She got a cloth and scrubbed my face raw.*

*'Just like your mother,' she said.*

But what had Kari turned out like? The book said she had worked as a receptionist in a hotel on one of the Fjords. Kari, the girl in the diary, would have chatted and laughed with them. This is where she met her husband, a Swedish business man. She moved to Sweden. When he died in 1990, she moved back to live in a suburb outside of Oslo.

Hanna was cold. Her hands were icy. She would light the fire. She knelt down and piled the paper and then the wood into the grate. She lit the edges of the paper and waited for the kindling to spread to the wood. There had been a wave of silence running through the family, lapping around them, around the shame. She hadn't wanted Mary to feel it, but she had.



When the fire began to crackle she got up to close the curtains. Her garden needed doing. The grass. The weeds. Outside, it was still light. She'd leave the curtains open. She paused with the curtain in her hand and watched two young boys sauntering past with cans in their hands. Youths like that frightened her. One turned, his head was shaved and his piercing, dark eyes caught hers as he put up his finger and mouthed 'fuck you'. She jumped back, and as they walked away, she gave him the same gesture.

She giggled as she peered after them. Hanna putting up a finger at a youth. She was tougher than she thought.

## Their Last Holiday

The compound didn't look like a caravan park. Not with the ten-foot brick wall and electric wires along the top. The five or six caravans were like armoured vehicles, with metal shutters that closed over the glass and reinforced doors. Mark had upgraded our caravan in a similar fashion. They were all the rage in *Caravan Monthly*. On the inside of the door we had a big wheel that turned to lock it. Mark was adamant that we had a holiday. It had been eight years and since we couldn't go abroad we might as well make use of the caravan he had inherited from his parents.

'This isn't so bad,' he said, with the awning in his arms. 'Quite green. Nice pony.'

He nodded towards a brown Shetland pony, which had its own enclosure in the corner of the park. It was nibbling the grass.

'Do we have carrots?'

'Don't go mushy on him. You'll be taking him home. Come on. I want to get everything set up. You hold this here.'

He started to thread the awning through the rim of the caravan. Mark threaded it and I held the awning over our heads so it dragged from the right side of the caravan to the left. I had to keep holding the awning as he inserted the poles and pushed one end in the grass. It took an age and I kept thinking an awning was no use for a quick getaway. But Mark had insisted. Then he was hammering the pegs in. I tried to help, but he seemed to prefer a witness to his efforts. While he checked the pegs I had a look at the other caravans. They seemed empty. Then a man poked his head out of a door and gingerly stepped out. He stared at us and out ran a pit bull. I jumped, but it was on a leash.

It was late afternoon. The sun was setting and other heads popped out of the caravans. Had they spent the whole day indoors?

Mark carried the barbeque from the Range Rover. 'Sausages here we come,' he said, grinning. He began to set it up, linking the pipe to a small canister of gas. I had all the sausages and burgers on a plate and was thinking about the salad I would make when the manager came trooping over from the office. 'Sorry sir, but barbeques aren't allowed. The smell you see.'

'Right,' Mark said. 'No problem.'

As he hurried back, Mark said, 'The smell?' What difference does that make?'



The whole point of caravanning was barbeques, so we sat inside and looked at the plates of meat. Mark said, 'I'll grill the sausages then.'

It wasn't the same. We ate in silence. I forced down a few bites of a sausage, and picked at the salad. We'd brought enough food to last a couple of weeks, even though we had only come for a weekend.

When we'd finished I started sorting the things outside. There were the bags of duvets. They needed to come in. The chairs.

'Leave it, will you. Why don't you just relax? Or there is no point us coming here.'

'I just want it sorted by the time it gets dark.'

'The dark doesn't make any difference.'

'I know...'

The sun was glowing maroon over the wall, as if it was perched there in a mood. Mark was drinking his Holts beer. 'You don't even want to be here,' he said.

'Yes I do. But it's natural I'm worried. Anyone would be.'

'Nowhere is safe. You either continue your life or you don't.'

I turned to watch the pony. He was chewing the grass. I'd take some carrots or something to him in the morning. He seemed lonely there, on his own.

When the initial attack happened eight years ago, I was visiting my parents. We hid in the cellar with the washing machine and dryers. We put extension leads under the door and cooked from an electric pan and my dad played with the pipes so water came through, but as it turned out, none of them invaded the house anyway. Mark didn't come to find me. He'd been at a lock-in. They'd lived on the pub's food and ale for two months. He'd had a riot.

I slept fitfully in the caravan. The bed was too short for Mark, so he kept kneeing me in the back. I was a bad sleeper anyway. The air was close in here and I was desperate to open a window, but Mark always complained, even though we had the shutters. We were in a thick blackness. Too black for comfort. I lay there, my eyes sore and tired, but unable to sleep. At home, I could go in another room, make a chamomile tea and read, but not here.

I'd never dreamt of them. You'd think I would. My dreams were of the past, when we didn't live under this threat.

As everyone did, I listened for noises, but there was nothing. Mark's knee hit me in the back again, so I pushed him. 'What the fuck?' he said, and then he turned over and slept. I'd never have married him without all this. That was a fact. When the first attack ended and they were mostly destroyed by the army or locked up in camps, Mark came to find me. The fear made us romantic.

We were getting our lives back on track. I was going to do the MA I had never started. My brother was still stuck abroad; the border controls had not been let up. Through all of this I had felt untouched by it. We watched the riots on the news and we had seen them wandering in the road as if they were lost. For many years we were on rations, which were dropped outside houses by the army. They stood guard while you came out to collect them. You got them if you gave up anyone with the telltale symptoms of dementia. Conscription started, but no one complained. At least in the army you had access to weapons. Mark had done his two years of service and I knew what he had stored in the top cupboard.

I woke to Mark saying something. 'What?' I said.

'There is no fucking need to ban cooking meat. It's just reactionary. It makes no difference.'

'Can we have a bit of light?'

He sighed and pulled the shutter up a fraction. Then he passed me a mug. 'Here you go.'

'Thanks.' I sipped the coffee. Mark was good at coffee. That's when we heard the screaming. I jumped and spilt the coffee on my front, scalding my arm. Mark banged down the shutters and grabbed the cutting knife from the drawer. I crawled over the bed and crouched next to him on the floor in front of the fridge, pulling the duvet after me.

'That won't help,' he hissed.

I put my hands over my ears. The woman was screaming and screaming, then crying. 'Please,' she cried. 'Please.'

The screaming faded and then stopped.

'I fucking told you,' I muttered. 'I fucking told you.'

I lay there, tears running down my cheeks. 'Shush,' Mark said. 'Stop crying.' I held my breath so I wouldn't make a noise.



Then there was nothing. We waited. I crawled onto the bed and Mark remained crouched on the floor.

‘I knew it,’ I hissed. ‘I knew...’

‘Shhhhh...’

Something banged against the side of the caravan, tapping randomly, then it sounded as if it was slapping its hands against the shutters. It threw itself against the side and the caravan rocked.

But it couldn’t get in here. We’d had the caravan renovated. There was a crashing and tearing. It must be in the awning.

Everyone must have shut themselves up in their caravans because there wasn’t a noise from anywhere. I thought they’d all be out, gung ho, but it was quiet.

We stayed still. They’d said that the least noise the better. The shutter was still an inch open. I could hear the pony neighing and snorting. And then a noise like I’d never heard and I knew it was the pony. It neighed and screeched. I pulled myself up and opened the shutter with the lever. I only raised it a couple of inches, but still I could see the enclosure with the pony in it and two of them on him. One was hanging from his neck. The other was on his back, biting into the other side of its neck. The pony stamped his feet and kicked, trying to loosen them from him. But they grabbed at his ears and dug their fingers into his throat till they toppled him over. They crouched on top of it, tearing at its flesh. Its legs kicked and kicked.

Then there was a face at the window. Clear brown eyes; they looked shocked, confused, it was a young boy, perhaps eleven or twelve. His hands began to scrabble at the window. Mark lowered the shutter and the thing tried to hold it up, its dirty fingers curled round the edge. Then the shutter was down.

We sat there, Mark holding the lever.

‘What do you think you were doing?’

I put my hands over my mouth, but I couldn’t stop crying.

‘They know we’re in here now.’

‘I know.’

I breathed in deeply and tried to stop crying.

‘How the fuck did they get in?’ he whispered. The thing was scrabbling at the shutters, scraping its nails on the metal.

‘Maybe someone was infected.’

‘Well they must have been, mustn’t they?’

He sat on the bed and said, ‘Well that’s one holiday ruined. And he was going on about not using a barbeque. We might as well have done.’

‘Sssshhh. It’s still out there.’

‘We should have bought a campervan,’ he said. ‘Instead of doing the renovations.’

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the thing outside to stop scrabbling at the window. Mark was crouched on the floor, the big red knife in his hand. He turned it and looked at it. Then the scrabbling stopped. Silence.

We looked at each other and waited. When nothing happened, I said, ‘Either we can wait here or we can try to get out. The army will come.’

He nodded. ‘I’m not waiting for them. I’ll open the door. With the collapsed awning, they might not notice it. Then I’ll climb under the caravan and you follow and we’ll get in the car and drive to the manager’s office and try to get out of here.’

‘OK.’

He put on jeans and a jacket. Then he got out a cricket bat, hand gun and a larger gun I didn’t know the name of. ‘I don’t want it,’ I said as he passed the hand gun to me.

‘Don’t be daft. Take it.’

The gun was heavy in my hand. He slipped out the door. I looked at my watch. Five minutes I’d give him. I was in my nightie, so I tried to put on jeans and jumper quietly, but my hands were shaking and every noise felt loud. My handbag. That was no use. I got Mark’s bag that went over his shoulder and filled it with my phone, keys, purse, water. Food? I put some Mars bars in it. Then I waited. The screaming started again. Mark hadn’t said whether I had to wait for a signal or not. I opened the door a little, bracing to pull it back. But there was just the material of the fallen awning behind it. There was a space next to the step so I poked the broom handle in that direction. Nothing happened, so I pushed myself under the caravan. He wasn’t there. He must be in the car. I edged to the other side, keeping away from the light and listening to the screaming. I could hear running. I lay flat on the ground and looked around. Nothing. Just grass and the shadows of other caravans. What was happening? Then I heard the scrabbling of something caught in the awning. I twisted my head. The awning was being pulled away and then it fell back and something was set free.

I lay there, the grass against my face. I could see water dripping from the caravan and ahead was our car. I crawled across the grass towards it. As I got to the edge of the



caravan, there was a scrabbling behind me. Ahead was clear so I dived for the car and scrambled in, pulling the door behind me. Mark was gripping the driver's wheel. 'I'm gonna fucking kill them,' he said. 'Look.'

Two of them stepped out of a caravan, bloodied and dirty.

'Mark,' I said. 'Drive.'

He turned the key and started the car.

'Just run them over,' I said, 'if you have to.'

'I know.'

We drove around a caravan and towards the manager's office next to the gates. The door was open. I turned. The two figures were heading towards us.

'So what are we supposed to do, go in and find some keys?'

'I'll park the car next to the door.' He reversed next to the door. The two of them were around us now, circling the car.

'We can't get out,' I said.

They slammed their hands against the windows and bonnet. Up close they didn't look that different. The woman had blood running down her chest. The t shirt was ripped at the neck. She must have been the one who screamed.

'I'm not getting out,' I said.

Then a man opened his caravan door and shot the woman. I ducked down in my seat. The other one ran towards him.

'Now,' Mark said.

I opened my door and scrambled inside the office. Mark climbed over his seat and came in after me. There was the welcome desk, with *Wilson's Caravan Park* in big letters on the front.

We edged through to the next room. The manager was lying on the floor. His trouser leg was ripped and blood pooled around him. A young woman was lying near him, crying and whimpering.

'Where's the key?' Mark asked.

The manager shook his head.

'What happened?' I asked.

You could see they had been at him. The material was ripped and a chunk had been bitten out of his thigh. 'I don't know. One of the families. They were all infected. Like they'd come here for their last holiday.'

‘Where’s the key?’ Mark repeated. ‘The key to the gate.’

‘You can’t leave.’

‘Yes we can.’

Mark got out his gun from his pocket and said, ‘Give us the key.’

‘Please,’ the woman said. There were bleeding gashes on her neck and arms. ‘Don’t kill us.’

‘I won’t kill you. Give us the key.’

‘On the desk,’ she said.

‘Helen!’ the manager said.

‘Under the papers.’

‘Get it,’ Mark said.

I picked up the key-ring, with two keys.

‘One for this door and one for the gate,’ she said.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

Mark walked near to her and shot her in the head, then turned and shot the manager. His head fell back on the floor and blood spilled out around him.

We looked at each other and something surged through me. ‘Come on,’ he said, grasping my hand. We made for the door, but stopped when we heard the other door open. A woman ran in, bleeding, behind her stumbled a man and a small boy. They stopped when they saw Mark and his gun. ‘It’s OK,’ he said. Then he shot the woman. The man ran for Mark, and I knew what I had to do.



## Thermal Vest

I was already mature at twelve, as if I'd long-jumped over adolescence and landed in middle age. I never dreamed of wearing a flimsy shirt, baring my belly button and skinny arms; I hated the cold too much for that. The wind would rip round the quads and catch me unguarded. So I went to school prepared – in a long-sleeve thermal vest and shorts with a lace trim, under two, sometimes three pairs of tights. These I carefully unrolled in one layer before PE. I thought no one noticed my multiple layers. But they did.

The classrooms opened out onto the quads, as if the shell of the school had been removed. Jennifer and I would shiver outside the music room and huddle on the pavement corridor. We'd ask the music teacher if we could practise our violins at lunchtime. She would nod, distractedly, peering through the door to see what the delinquents were doing to the trees. She began each class with a song about manners and gave them lessons on how to hold their forks when she was on dinner duty. To compensate, Jen and I were super polite. We tried curtsying for her once, but she thought we were taking the mick.

During break, Jen and I set our music stand near the dripping radiator and stuffed paper towels into the drafty gaps at the windows. Our breaths came like icy clouds. We were practicing a violin duet, well two parts of a quartet. We didn't know where we'd play the duet, or who might want to listen, but we were on the lookout for a cellist and viola player. We'd never met either.

Around us, xylophones, cymbals and burst drums were piled up in heaps. Most were broken, but they were still used in class. Jen tried a few notes from the beginning of our duet, while I slid resin along my bow. I fingered my fringe, forcing it to curl under, but it resolutely curled up and out, like a ski slope. I hated my fringe and frizzy hair.

We were hiding out in the music room for another reason. The spaces we could hang around in had disappeared. We avoided the corner of the yard where our old group crouched on their heels, their backs sliding down the walls. The dank toilets were patrolled by prefects who'd bang on the doors till you came out. But here, we could close the door and pretend we were playing at The Bridgewater.

It started with the three of them staring over my shoulder. They took turns, almost queued up. One after the other, Karen, Sal and Joe addressed sentences to somewhere beyond my hood: who did I think I was with my long words and did I know my tights wrinkled around my ankles like Nora Batty. I checked to see what they were staring at.

There was just a dispirited game of football, with green jumpers as goal posts and a deflated ball that landed with a plop.

‘That’s what you do Bethany,’ Karen said. ‘You stare over our shoulders.’

I flushed hot, despite the cold. They continued, one after the other, like they’d written a script: how sad I was in my vests, my tights; my coat was just dirty. I was a dirty cow. And only a sad cow fancied Mozart.

My tights *had* fallen half way to my knees. I tried to discreetly pull them up, but it was too complicated with all the layers. The bell rang and they turned, neat as soldiers in parade and marched off. Jen was still there though, adjusting her uniform-green earmuffs. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. The Mozart jibe stung. I’d told Sal this when she confided to me that she fancied the maths teacher. I began to cry, my chest heaving. I walked towards the empty field so no one would see. Catching up, Jen passed me a tissue and patted my sleeve. It was my turn. Last time it had been Sal’s and I’d stood with her in the dinner queue. There seemed to be a rota going. Next it would be Jen. But never Karen. I cried into my tissue and thought about running away with my violin.

That was three weeks ago and since then I’d woken each morning with a choking lump in my chest, knowing it was a school day. So I called for Jen on the way in and we spent our breaks in the music room. Jen and I were playing two parts of *String Quartet 14*, the *allegro* section. Jen played the melody and I played the harmony. I liked the low notes that slotted in with the tune. I tapped my foot to keep us in time. In my violin case was a small folded picture of Mozart. *Johannes Chrysostamus Wolfgangus Theophilus (Gottrieb) Mozart*. I’d seen *Amadeus* and liked him despite the wigs.

‘You’ve slowed down,’ Jen said over my playing.

‘What?’

‘Your foot. You’ve slowed down.’

My feet were icy. ‘It’s too cold to play,’ I said. ‘I can’t move anything. I’m stiff.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

We both knew the piece was too difficult and sounded rubbish as a duet. But we played it anyway. I played anything I could by Mozart. I spent my Saturdays in Forsyth’s music shop looking at the sheet music and the pictures of Mozart on the covers.



We blew on our fingers and jumped up and down. The music teacher came in, clutching a mug. She preferred it in here as well, away from the staff room. She sat at her desk and drooped over her drink, as if warming her face. She didn't seem to have noticed us, so we carefully unloosened our bows, placed our violins in their cases and hid them behind the drums in the corner. She looked up, her glasses were steamed.

'I can't cope,' she said. 'I can't cope.'

We thought we should give her some time to herself, so we wandered round the yard till we came to another group. One of them also played the violin, so we edged over. They were talking about diets. We couldn't comment as Jen was thin and wiry (she did karate) and I was bony and usually trying to eat more to keep warm. So we smiled and looked interested. One of them asked Jen which music she liked and she looked at her shoes and muttered, 'Folk'.

'What? Folk?'

'You mean folk dancing?'

'You know the uniform doesn't mean you have to wear a green coat, or green earmuffs.'

Jen's turn, I thought. It wasn't her fault her mother took the school rules on uniforms too far.

'Look,' one said, as if she was waging a bargain. 'Bethany, you can hang around with us if you like. But Jen, just get lost.'

With that they glided, one at the head, in the V of a flock of migrating birds, to the other side of the yard - their scraped back ponytails swinging, and pink and white Adidas bags thrown over their shoulders. The rain fell hard and bit into my cheeks. I could feel my fringe frizzing up. I stared after them. I could join their group, buy an Adidas bag and a short skirt. But they were just the same as Karen and Sal. I thought of all the weeks that Jen had spent with me. Otherwise I would have had to wander round on my own, circling the yard, pretending I was going somewhere or practising alone in the music room.

Jen was gulping and rubbing her eyes. So I said, taking a deep breath, 'They are bitches! Want to go back to the music room?'

'OK.'

She took off her ear muffs and looked at them. Then she stuffed them into her rucksack and said in her high-pitched way, 'I forgot, I've got my cow hand-warmer!' She got out a plastic squidgy cow's face, rubbed it between her hands and gave it to me. The tips of my fingers were purple from the cold, but the cow's face was warm and had a big pink smile. We warmed our hands and then hurried back to the music room, sharing a packet of Walker's crisps on the way.

'You know what I want to do,' I said in between crisps. 'Go busking. We could pretend we were going shopping on Saturday and then play on Market Street.'

Jen nodded. 'Maybe passing musicians will want to join our quartet?'

'Oh yes,' I said. 'I think they will.'



**Notes for the Verifiable and True Biography of the Little Known Artist and Botanist Mrs Charlotte Manning (b.1805, m. 1833 d. 1835.)**

While writing this collection of stories I became sidetracked by a bibliography of women's nineteenth-century travel narratives, which mentions the little known botanist and artist, Charlotte Manning, whose drawings and notes on Tasmanian wildlife were published posthumously in 1840 by Sparrow Press, London. The following is not a short story as such, rather it is merely notes towards a biography, which draws on her letters and diaries stored in the Women's Library, London.

I have spent many hours researching into the life of Charlotte Manning during my visits to London, and yet I do not fully know what happened to her. I will begin on The Eagle, soon to land in Hobart Town, which is carrying sheep, supplies, 30 convicts and four paying passengers, including Charlotte Manning.

When I imagine Charlotte, I see her re-pinning her dark hair as the wind slaps it about her face. She is standing on the deck of The Eagle, wrapped in a lacy black shawl, holding a parasol, now battered from four months at sea, its blue and white frills tinged grey and stiff with salt. The heat and the wind sear her cheeks. She knows she should stay out of the sun; that her complexion is growing ruddy, but it is too thrilling to watch the ship's mates going about their work, scurrying up and down the masts, and scrubbing the decks. The speck on the horizon is growing and she can make out mountains, the jagged shore and the docks of Hobart Town. She twirls her parasol in excitement. A brand new land.

In a letter to her mother, dated 8<sup>th</sup> December 1834, she writes:

Mother, you would find sea voyage irksome. The ship is as dirty as we supposed due to it being an old coal-boat. An air of coal dust seems to trail in the ship's wake. The cabin is cramped and not the most clean, and swarms with wood-lice. Despite these deprivations, I find seafaring, and I do feel like a seafarer, to be the most exciting occupation in the world. If I do not move from my position, the captain lets me remain on the rim of the quarterdeck. He is most courteous, though

the other mates are coarse in their manners and as slovenly and idle as you could imagine.

I am managing to draw a little, despite the rocking of the ship. In fact, one could say that I have found both my sea legs and my sea fingers! I have enclosed a few sketches of the ocean, sea birds, and parts of the ship.

For the first few days the other passengers were completely indisposed due to seasickness, but they have since recovered their equanimity. Mr and Mrs Clouth are kind though Doctor Brignose, who is a professor from Oxford University, is trying to educate me about the colony. His discourses at dinner on bone collecting are interminable. Yesterday, there was a weevil on his plate, and I didn't dare interrupt him telling me about savages' skulls while he ate it.

I have sad news to tell you mother. Josie succumbed to fever and passed away a few weeks into the voyage. I know you will be concerned about my wellbeing, but The Clouths have taken me under their wing and Mrs Clouth has nominated me as her chief companion.

There are details she doesn't mention in the letter, but can be found in her diary: Josie dying in Charlotte's cabin, the rancid smell of the hold, and seeing wrapped bodies tipped into the sea with only a few lines from a prayer book. She writes, 'When I wake in the night, I see Josie sinking to the bottom of the ocean, the sheet unravelling like a spool, her hair cascading, her eyes open and seeing'.

Charlotte says little about her husband, Charles Manning, in the voyage diary and letters. In an online archive, a number of official documents record his career and work for the New Land Company. He took his post in 1833, immediately after marrying Charlotte. She joined him a year later. After Charlotte's death, he would remain a widower for a number of years and finally marry a freed convict woman called Grace Jones. As I write this, I wonder how much she knew him before they married and why she was so eager to leave England. Charlotte's earlier diaries note that they met in Bath. She describes him as 'tall' and 'swarthy' and 'the epitome of a hero in a romance'. There are conflicting accounts of how he proposed. In one letter she describes it as 'the most romantic thing possible', all on 'one knee' and exclaims, 'I thought my heart would burst' (to Louisa Jane, c.1833), but her diary glosses over their meeting with, 'we are getting married. At least I will be able to leave England.'



In her diary entry dated 5<sup>th</sup> June 1833, she writes:

Charles is so excited about his new employment. I am glad to go with him and leave England. I detest Bath and London. There must be somewhere different. I can hardly breathe here, as if there are a thousand eyes watching, hidden in every corner. I am so glad we are escaping this place together.

Yesterday, while we were sojourning on the bench in the orchard, Charles said Van Diemen's land was 'unclaimed land,' and fairly crushed my hands in his. 'Darling, it's a tabula rasa, there for the picking. It's all ours. When you arrive, there will be our home in the most beautiful land, with all the flowers you can draw.

I imagine Charlotte at her position on the quarterdeck, waiting for her sea chests to be brought up. The ship bustles with men carrying bags and boxes. Charlotte is apprehensive as they approach the port. Her diary describes the docking:

Hobart Town is situated on the rising banks of the Derwent, with green meadows, gardens and pleasant country residences; and, above and beyond all, there are the snowy mountain peaks of Mount Wellington.

On the harbour, there was no sign of Charles, though his servant, Johnson, was there to meet me. He is a large man, with a bulbous, pock-marked face; the very epitome of a convict-servant. We travelled to the residence on horseback, along terrible roads, which were merely indents in the dirt. Our residence is not situated in the lovely Hobart Town at all; it is a number of miles away, in a lonely valley, surrounded by 'bush'. At first I was alarmed at this, but then I thought how wonderful it will be to live in a secluded location. The house is made of rickety wooden flaps, as if it could be lifted clean off the ground.

As Johnson shows her around, he says Charles will not return until the evening. She is dismayed at this news, and tries not to look aghast at the small kitchen and barely furnished parlour, or the three cramped bedrooms. One floor is not a house. Her room is pretty enough, with a large bed, washstand and chest of drawers.

It is early evening when Charles returns. She waves from the doorway, but he does not seem to see her. Charles and three other men are on horseback, carrying rifles. He shouts to the men as they go past to the stables. She writes:

He did not say where he had been. He went to wash before he would greet me properly. Then he strode into the parlour and grasped my hands, brushing his lips on my cheek. I stood on tiptoe, but he turned away and poured himself a drink of port.

After dinner, he took my hands and said, 'My dearest Charlotte. We live in difficult times. We were under attack from the savages.' He told me that the savages were cruel, dangerous and unpredictable. There would always be someone at the house to protect me, but he would show me where the pistol was kept.

I feel very much afraid.

That night as she is getting ready for bed, Charles goes out again and listens to shouting and men's voices. She tiptoes downstairs, her shawl around her, and makes her way to the kitchen door, but Johnson says, 'Go back to bed, madam. It is nothing.'

There is no mention of her fear of attack in her letters to her mother. Instead she writes of the Reverend Thomas Atkins and Mr Backhouse coming to dinner. She states, 'They had such an altercation about the savage tribes and how they will disappear before the civilised races. One says it's the divine will and the other that they are the link between man and the monkey tribe! However, you don't want to hear of that dreary business, mother. You will be pleased to know that the climate is much like home, though the seasons are all back to front.'

Her diary tells a different story. 'I don't really feel married,' she states. 'Charles is hardly at home. I am lonely, but I prefer his absence. The only company I have is Johnson, with his horrid porridge face. He is maid, cook and butler. He speaks to me as if he is the one giving the commands.'

During this time Charlotte sets about drawing and documenting the local flora, though she is told not to venture far:

I have to content myself with whatever I find in the vicinity. I am cooped up. A hen in a hen house, though I am glad we have few visitors because they invariably bring



news of Hobart Town. In a letter from Mrs Clouth, I was distressed to hear slander about a woman who had lived here for years without ill repute. Apparently, she had had some affair in England. Someone had travelled all the way here to inform people of this! I can barely induce myself to reply to her fifteen-page letter.

Around the house the valley is rich and verdant; a stream wanders nearby, which is interrupted by huge rocks; shrubs and trees hang over and dip into its shady pools, and all around there is flora and foliage, which I have already begun collating and drawing. Towards the hills there are clusters of gum trees, with their white gnarled and twisted roots, which pertain an uncanny aspect, as if they could come alive.

My favourite is the Waratah bush, a lovely shrub or bushy trees, which has dark-green foliage and bright red flowers of loosely clustered trumpet florets.

Charlotte Manning's pamphlet *The Indigenous Flora of Van Diemen's Land* is out of copyright. As far as I have been able to gather, there are only four copies in existence. The Women's Library archive has allowed me to reproduce two of her drawings. Here is her drawing of the Waratah bush:

[drawing of the Waratah bush]

Sitting in this stuffy library and in need of a coffee, I think of Charlotte in a wide-brimmed hat. She is collecting flowers, picking off stems and buds to be pressed, drawing them in pencil, and using a watercolour wash. She sits with her pencils and sketchpad for hours during the day. She feels a calmness, a serenity here, something she never felt back home. Her diary does not reveal why she wanted to leave England, but she writes, 'Perhaps I am a type of convict too, paying a penance, but it is a penance paid in paradise.'

The one drawing that stands out in her notebooks does not appear in her pamphlet on indigenous flora. It is a drawing of an outhouse. In the background, there are hills swathed in clouds. In the foreground there are stables, the stream and to the right a small wooden building. The door is closed and there are no windows. Half the building is carefully shaded in, using cross-hatching and smudging, but the rest is just an outline.

[drawing]

Perhaps it is while drawing the outhouse that Charlotte wonders what is inside. She is there with her stool and easel, no maybe she does not use an easel since the notebook is small. She is drawing on her knee and there is a stand for her parasol to keep the sun off her cheeks. It is quiet, for as usual there is only Johnson at home. Charlotte is sweaty and prickly under her long-sleeved blouse and full skirt. She is squinting in the sun and shading in part of the building. This is when she hears a noise. She can barely make it out. She glances around and hears it again. A moaning: a strange, low cry coming from the outhouse. She tells us in her diary, 'There was a noise and I was curious about it. I wish, God preserve me, that I had not ventured to find it out.'

She leaves her parasol and notebook, and picks her way through the grass to the building. Yellowed bushes have sprouted up around the door. Perhaps she bends to smell or pause at a flower. She pulls at the lock. The door is bolted from the outside. She must have got a key from the house - this is not stated in her diary. Perhaps she takes the bunch of keys from the kitchen and tries each key till one fits the lock.

As the door opens, the smell hits her, something bad; something rotting. She coughs and covers her mouth. The doorway shines a square of light into the room, revealing hay spread on the ground. She pushes the door open and light falls onto a figure lying on the floor. The figure has thin, black legs that are chained together. One is swollen and bleeding. The figure moans and Charlotte steps forward. It is a woman, though she hardly seems a woman; her hair is cut short and she is thin, the skin taut on her cheekbones. She is lying on her side and her face is on the ground. A scrap of cloth is drawn over her, wet with blood. The woman lifts her head and raises her hands to her face. She tries to say something, but her voice is a scratch, a mutter. Charlotte cannot make it out.

'I stepped back,' she writes in her diary. 'I cannot describe how I felt at that moment, but then I heard a voice behind me. 'What are you doing here?' It was Johnson.

At the touch of his hand on her elbow, her knees buckle. 'Come away. You should not be here,' he says. He grips her arm and she falls against him, gasping, sobs rising in her chest. He pulls her out of the building and into the sunlight and then he turns and locks the door.

She can feel herself crying as she walks back to the house. By the door she stops. In her diary she says, 'I told him to give me the keys. The woman needed water. But he shook



his head and said, 'I'm afraid I can't. It's Master Charles' orders.' So I let him lead me into the house.'

She stumbles up to her bedroom. She takes off her hat, undoes her blouse buttons and splashes water on her face. Her breath is tight in her chest. She lies on her bed, quite still, until her husband returns in the early evening. She listens for his tread in the corridor and sits up straight when he knocks at the door.

While I was reading Charlotte Manning's diary and writing these notes, I wanted Charlotte to be heroic, for her to wait till night falls, find the keys and go to the outhouse to give the woman water, and then release her. But this does not happen. Her husband returns in the evening and he is furious. He throws her bedroom door open. 'Do not dare,' he says from the doorway, 'To interfere in my business. Do not meddle around any building that is not the house.' Then he sits next to her on the bed and sighs, 'You have much to learn, darling. There are many things happening that you do not understand. I think from now on Johnson should remain with you when you are outside of the house.'

Charlotte nods, but pulls her hands away from his.

'Come,' he says. 'If things calm down, I'll organise an expedition for your flowers.'

Charlotte's diaries differ from the published travel narratives by women; they do not mention the Aborigines at all. However, Charlotte's only subsequent mention of the incident in her diary states: 'I did not want to think of the outhouse. It was too painful. At least I have my drawings, but sometimes I dream of the building, and in the dream I am trying to enter it, hitting my hands on the door, but it will not open.' She submerged herself in her art and the publication of her pamphlet, *The Rarity and Beauty of The Indigenous Flora of Van Diemen's Land*. Nothing is known of what happened to the Aboriginal woman. I presume Charlotte did not return to the outhouse. Charlotte died a year later. A letter to her mother from Charles Manning states:

Dear Mrs Brown,

It causes me great pain to be the one to inform you of Charlotte's demise. We were exceedingly happy in our marriage, but two months ago, Charlotte became gravely ill. Her exact illness is unknown, but the physician thought it was a type of fever. She has been

buried in the graveyard on the property. I enclose her pamphlet on the indigenous flora of Van Diemen's Land. My deepest condolences and sincerest wishes,  
Charles Manning.



### **Sunday Afternoon**

The crowd surges towards the doors. Devrim gasps and coughs as he is pushed down the corridor. Smoke burns his throat. Japhet must be behind him. He tries to look, but someone knocks the back of his knee - his bad knee - and his legs buckle. Devrim grabs the denim-clad shoulder in front of him and an arm drags him up. The corridor opens out into a foyer with glass doors. A voice says, 'Stand back, stand back.' It's one of the holding centre guards. Then the doors are opening and Devrim is pushed through the foyer. They are outside. Devrim tumbles onto the tarmac. His knee gives way and he hits the ground. A woman falls over his legs. 'Sorry,' he says. 'Are you OK?' She is crying as another woman helps her up. Devrim pulls himself to his feet. He needs to get out of the way. People spill out of the doors. He looks around. They aren't in the usual enclosure; they have come out of another door of the terminal. The runways and grass stretch into the distance. Three or four men – probably Zimbabwean – run towards the runway. Other men collapse on the ground, coughing. Devrim searches, but he can't see Japhet. Sirens and alarms sound as other terminal doors open, spilling out holiday makers and people in uniforms. Devrim shakes off the gravel on his palms and reaches for his plastic bag of papers, but he doesn't have them.

**The Immigration Acts  
Between  
Devrim Badr  
And  
The Secretary of State and the Home Department  
Determination and Reasons**

### **Details of the Appellant and Representation**

1. The appellant, born 25 September 1957, is a citizen of Iran and is male. He was present at the hearing and was represented by Ms Brown. The respondent was represented by Mr Crown.

### **Substantive Issues Under Appeal and Proceedings**

2. The appellant has appealed against the Refusal of Leave to Enter after Refusal of Asylum. The notice and the Decision, addressed to the appellant, were made by the respondent on 27 June 2007 and contain removal direction to the country of nationality.
3. The appellant claims to be a refugee whose removal from the United Kingdom would be a breach of the United Kingdom's obligations under the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and under the 1950 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.
4. Article 1 of the 1951 Convention a refugee as someone who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted from reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership to a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

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'What you do?' Japhet had been lying on the other bed, his arm drawn over his eyes. 'Vous scrivez,' he said, making a writing movement with his hand.

'Je suis...' Devrim said, and faltered. 'A book. About poetry.'

'Poet?'

'No, no.' Devrim shifted on his bed and picked up his notes and papers. Everybody presumed he was a poet. He had written verse, but he had only ever shown it to his wife, who had said, 'Very nice, Devrim', the way she might praise a child.

'I am a professor of Kurdish literature,' he said, but Japhet had leaned back on his pillow, his eyes closed. His long, bare feet dangled off the bed. Japhet turned to face the wall, his blue t-shirt stretched over his spine. A thin scar ran down his neck. When Japhet had undressed, Devrim had seen other scars on ribs and back.

Even with all his papers, Devrim fitted on his bed. Since he had arrived a week ago, he had hardly left it, as if he and his work were on a raft at sea. Not that there was anywhere to go, just the canteen for meals and an hour in the yard, where he would smoke his daily cigarette. The first day he had shared one with Japhet, but now Japhet did not go



outside. Japhet had only shown interest in Devrim's lighter, which had a tiny floating naked woman in it. Tim, who had visited Devrim in Yarls Wood, had given it to him, as well as two pairs of Union Jack underpants.

Devrim had already stayed in Colnbrook, Yarls Wood, and two other Short Term Holding Centres. They kept moving him around, for no reason he could fathom. This place was smaller than the others. The room was approximately 4 m by 3 m, and contained two narrow beds, a toilet at the end (they were locked in at night) and a sink, and the stale smell of cooped up bodies.

Japhet seemed to have fallen asleep. Japhet had said he'd been here a month and that he was from the Congo. He managed to doze or remain still for most of the day. He didn't even go for meals. He must have a stomach complaint or some illness.

Devrim shifted the pillow under his knee. It was swollen again, but there was no point asking for a doctor in here.

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### **Burden and Standard of Proof**

1. In asylum cases, the burden of proof is on the appellant and, in the present case, it is for the appellant to show that returning to his country of origin will expose him to real risk of persecution for one of the five grounds recognised by the 1951 convention or give rise to a breach of human rights.

### **The Appellant's Claim**

2. The appellant's claim may be briefly summarised as follows. He claims he worked for the University of Tehran as Professor of Persian and Kurdish literatures. On 25 June 2006 he was getting off a train when armed police led him out of the train station and forced him into a car. Here, they placed a hood on his head and drove him to an unknown prison.
3. He claims he was kept in a cell for three months, where he was interrogated, and tortured for information on Kurdish rebels and their whereabouts. He was accused of 'crimes against national security', which included supporting Kurdish separatism and being an active member of the PKK. He was accused of spreading Kurdish propaganda to students in his research into Kurdish poetry.

4. The defendant claims he was released without explanation. He returned home to find his house had been raided. The dead body of his wife was in the bedroom. He claims she had been stabbed numerous times.
5. He left the country by fleeing to Turkey and taking a flight to the UK.

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Devrim woke clutching his papers. He sat upright and muttered: 'This is the Mengene mountain...When dawn creeps up to lake Van'. He reached for his pen. 'This is the Mengene Mountain...' he repeated. He scribbled the words down on his notepaper.

'...Fugitive pigeons at waterpools...something something...'and partridge flocks'

His memory wasn't what it was. He should have spent years memorising poetry instead of writing about it.

'Devrim!' Japhet moaned, pulling his cover over him.

'Sorry.'

He could not think clearly. Papers, ideas, quotes, none of it made sense. He'd written exactly two paragraph of his article, 'The Form of Resistance in Kurdish Poetry'. Two paragraphs in five weeks, when before he could have finished it in days. He whispered:

*Kurdish poetry has long been a means of fighting the hegemony of ruling cultures. It has given breath to the resistance that the Kurds have fought against the persecution since the emergence of a Kurdish literature in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries when poets began to write in the Kurdish dialects of Sorani and Kurmanji instead of the ruling languages...*

*The poet Abdulla Goran revolutionised Kurdish poetry by writing in the patterns of Kurdish folk songs instead of traditional Arabic metres. For the recent generation of Kurdish poets, such as Farhad Shakely, Ahmed Arif and others, free verse, folk songs and the rhythms of Kurdish speech are strategies in their poetry of resistance.*



Dévrin frowned at the page. He couldn't write under these conditions, not without his books. His desk in his university office, where it was cool in the mornings and he would write with coffee before the queue of students grew in the hall. He had been the nominal Kurdish lecturer; his colleagues had not made much of a noise about his disappearance. People disappeared and then they were forgotten.

If he got out of here, he would contact a university. That's what his wife would suggest. She'd always known what to do. 'My academic *peshmerga*,' Zeinab had called him. But it was Zeinab who was the *peshmerga*. Not him. She'd campaigned for women's rights, Kurdish rights, spent evenings printing leaflets, in meetings with other women.

And anyway, he had always imagined *peshmergas* wearing red turbans, riding horses and waving Kalashnikovs. Romantic figures, with lined, leathery faces, and squinting, haunted eyes. They were probably very different to the men hiding in the Qandil mountains. He had played *peshmergas* when he was a child, but he was usually cast as the evil militia, jumped on by his brother Bahma and the other boys, and then sat on till his mother shooed them away and recruited him as her thread holder. He'd liked holding the spools between his hands, as she wove, intent and frowning, and from all the thick coloured threads, a carpet would emerge. That is the memory he returns to, his mother weaving and beyond the mountains, grey-tipped and hazy in the heat.

When he moved to the city with Zeinab, he'd tried to encourage her to weave carpets, but she had no inclination, even though he bought her threads and wool. 'You do it, then,' she'd said. 'You make your carpet. I have better things to do.' She still liked to call him, 'my academic *peshmerga*,' as if he was an intellectual revolutionary, and when she said this she'd kiss his neck and pull off her scarf. She'd kneel over him, her thick hair down her back.

But the dried blood on the wall; the wide mark by the table. The trashed room; chairs upturned, books on the floor. He mustn't think of this.

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### The Respondent's Case

6. The detailed reasons for the respondent's decision are set out in a Home Office letter dated 24 June 2007 and essentially called into question the credibility and plausibility of the appellant's account.

## The Grounds of the Appeal

7. The decision is not in accordance with the law and is against the weight of the evidence.
8. The appellant's claim is credible.
9. The appellant has well founded fear of persecution by the state for the 1951 reason of ethnic persecution.

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Devrim came back from the canteen with bread stuffed in his pocket. The food in the canteen was sickening. Devrim had seen people throw up after eating. The place smelt, not as cooking should, aromatic and spicy, but of rotten cabbage and frying oil. In the queue for the midday meal, there had been talk of a charter plane. Some said Cairo. Others Nairobi. Sometimes you were warned about your deportation. Sometimes they just took you.

Devrim had listened to the talk and realised Japhet must be going on the charter flight.

In the cell, Japhet was lying on his back, his bare feet dangling off the edge. 'Here you are,' Devrim said. 'Some bread. Sorry, it is...' He pulled out the squashed bread that he had spread with margarine and wrapped in a napkin, and placed it on the edge of the bed by Japhet's shoulder.

Japhet shifted to his side and picked up the bread, then his hand went limp and the bread fell to the floor.

Japhet did not have a stomach complaint; he was on a hunger strike. There was a sign on the wall that said No Food, so Devrim picked the bread up, hid it in the napkin and placed it on Japhet's small pile of clothes.

It was early afternoon and he would do a few hours work. He would miss the time in the yard and his daily cigarette. He sat on his bed and read over what he had written:

*Ahmed Arif's poem is evidence of the political power of poetry both on and off the page. '33 Bullets' is an eulogy for thirty-three Kurds who were machine gunned in 1943 for having connections with Kurds on the other side of the border; their village had been divided by the Versailles treaty in 1923, and they were, as the*



*poem said, not used to passports. One man survived the massacre and managed to cross the border to his relatives. The poem was later recited by imprisoned Kurds. Its enunciation became a form of resistance.*

Devrim looked up to find a man in the room, kneeling beside Japhet's bed. The man, who was tall and thin like Japhet, murmured into Japhet's ear. Japhet nodded and pulled himself up.

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### **My Findings of Credibility and Fact**

10. There are many aspects of the appellant's account that are inherently implausible and overall, there is a series of disjointed claimed events with no given rational and causal explanation.
11. There is no reason given for the arrest and detention or of his release.
12. The appellant seems to have forgotten what he was interrogated about and accused of. He is not able to back up his story with any evidence. There is no proof of his incarceration or alleged torture.

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The bread was still wrapped in its napkin and Devrim was hungry. He had not been to the canteen the evening before. It seemed an offence to eat when this room was full of the air of starvation. It also stank. Even though Japhet was on a hunger strike, he could at least wash. But Japhet was not lying down now. He was perched on the end of his bed, his arms folded.

Down the corridor, from another cell, a woman began to wail. It was the wailing of mourning. Someone must have died. They weren't locked in their rooms yet, so Devrim got up to look peer round the door. Two of the guards rushed past and turned into a cell. Devrim could hardly make out their voices. Japhet gestured to let him see, so Devrim slumped on his bed. It was just a matter of time before they were all sent home. His work would never make any difference to that.

A guard locked their door from the outside, but from somewhere he could still hear the wailing. It was unbearable. Japhet leaned against the door, his arms folded. Devrim muttered:

*Shoot, bastards*

*Shoot me*

*I do not die easily*

*I am live under the ashes*

*I have words buried in my belly*

Japhet walked back and forth in front of the door, so Devrim said more loudly:

*Kinsman, write my story as it is*

*Or they might think it a fable*

*These are not rosy nipples*

*But a dum dum bullet*

*Shattered in my mouth*

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13. I do not believe that the appellant is under threat in his home country. He claims both to be a supporter and to be neutral concerning matters of Kurdish independence. If he is neutral then he has nothing to fear from the government. If he is a supporter of PJAK then he could be said to support a known terrorist group.
14. Likewise, I doubt his legitimacy as a professor of literature. There is no Devrim Badr. He claims to have published articles in various on line journals under the pseudonym Abbas Herii, but there is no evidence of this.
15. I conclude from the forgoing that the appellant is not an honest and truthful witness. I have no doubt that the account is an elaborate and deliberately disjointed fabrication in order to gain access to the UK.
16. The appellant claims that he fears persecution by the state. In the light of the facts which I have found, I have come to the inevitable conclusion that the appellant has failed to show that such fear is well-founded. I am not satisfied that he was



subjected to persecution whilst in Iran, and on the evidence available to me, I am not satisfied that he would be subject to persecution on his return.

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In the morning, Devrim got up to open the cell door, but it was still locked. He rattled it and went back to sit on his bed. Japhet was lying on his back, his eyes open and alert.

Devrim had seen all this before; they were locked up so it was easier to gather them for the charter flight. He fluffed up his pillow and settled himself against it. He would work on his article.

By the early afternoon, Devrim was starving. He had heard them coming round, but there was more commotion, more shouting

Japhet had his ear against the door. His jeans hung on his thin legs, but his eyes were bright as he turned round and said, 'lighter.'

Devrim rummaged through his things for his lighter and gave it to Japhet. Japhet knelt down and held the lighter against his bed sheets. The flame caught the material. Devrim stared down at his work, at the lines of writing and passed him some sheets. 'This will help,' he said. Japhet held the lighter to the edge of the sheet and Devrim saw his words begin to burn. 'And these,' he said. He reached for the documents, the letters from the solicitor, the appeal proceedings. 'Burn these.'

Japhet made a pile of them on the bed. He held the lighter to the edges of the paper. Gradually, the pile of paper began to burn. There they went. All the papers. The last of his work. All gone. The flames licked around them and caught the sheets. Devrim and Japhet looked at each other and began to laugh. The smoke rose in the air and then an alarm began to sound. They backed out of the way and crouched near the door as the flames caught the sheets. Then Japhet pushed Devrim's bed over and it began to burn too.

By the time the door opened, they were on the floor, coughing, and the guards had to drag them out. The flames burst out of the doorway and smoke filled the corridor.

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Devrim is sitting on the tarmac. Two or three of the women are crouching near to him, holding each other's hands. Devrim drags himself up and hobbles forward. The men who

ran are already past the runways, heading for the fields, the countryside. Alarms shrill and people pour out of the terminal building with suitcases and bags. Japhet stumbles out of the door and begins to run towards the grass. Devrim watches him. He has nothing now. No papers, no writing, no documents. Nothing. So he gets up and limps towards the runways, following Japhet. He can see the fence and he will get there.



## PART 2: CRITICAL COMMENTARY

### Section 1

#### Short Story Theory: The Quest for Definition

Since Edgar Allen Poe's review of Hawthorn's *Twice-Told Tales*, short story theory has been concerned with questions of defining the short story as a genre. Theorists have agonised over questions such as what is a short story and how is it different from the novel. This has resulted in theories that essentialised short stories and, until recently, did not go beyond issues of genre. For Axel Nissen, short story theory claims minority status. The theories were often in a form of 'an apologia or a defence' for short stories, which were the smaller, shorter, and therefore the 'poorer' relation to the novel.<sup>2</sup> While many short story theorists have defined the short story in terms of length and in comparison with the novel, I will discuss short stories in terms of structure, and follow the work of Eileen Baldeshwiler, who argued that there are two forms of short story: the 'epical' story, which depends on external plot and is 'end heavy', and the lyrical 'modern' story, which is structured by internal emotion and mood. I will then relate these two forms of the short story to 'postmodern' short fiction.

Early short story theory focused on issues of definition, categorisation and genre. These definitions hinged on length and how length structurally differentiated the short story from the novel. Edgar Allan Poe's review of Nathaniel Hawthorn's *Twice-Told Tales* set the parameters of short story theory. Poe argued that the short story *should* (and his review is prescriptive) be 'read at one sitting'. Its brevity enabled the unity and intensity of the form – which, he argued, longer forms, such as the novel, did not have, because they lacked 'the intense force derivable from *totality*'.<sup>3</sup> This definition has held sway in short story theory. However, what Poe is describing (and prescribing) is a particular kind of short story, which comprises the psychological thriller, gothic ghost story and detective story. This kind of short story will later be defined as the 'traditional' short story, the 'early' short story and

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<sup>2</sup> Axel Nissen, 'The Queer Short Story', in *The Art of Brevity, Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, ed. by Per Winter, Jacob Lothe and Hans H. Skei (South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2004), pp.181-190 (p.181).

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'Review of *Twice-Told Tales*', in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp.59-64 (p.61).

the nineteenth-century short story.<sup>4</sup> This 'traditional' short story depended on a build up of tone and intensity, and a subsequent revelation of meaning and closure. However, Poe's notion of the short story as a single entity, which is based on its sense of unity, has been a mainstay in short story theory; stories are defined in relation to how they attain or refuse this unity and sense of completeness.

As Axel Nissen argues, Poe is staking out territory for the short story within genres of literature. For Poe, the highest form was the poem, the second was the short story, and the novel was third because it lacked the unity of a poem or short story. Succeeding theorists, with the aggrandised status of the novel have had to defend the brevity of the short story in a cultural climate where, to show the 'masculine' terms of these debates, 'size matters'. Axel Nissen defines the short story as a 'queer' genre and the 'other' of the dominant form, the novel. This is a relationship that, 'like woman/man, black/white is not on equal terms'. 'As the 'other' it must continually justify its existence...agonise over its value and identity', which is precisely what short story theory has been concerned with since Poe's review.<sup>5</sup>

Either these generic definitions end up stating that a short story is 'a story that is short,' (Norman E. Friedman<sup>6</sup>) or they claim that definition is impossible. Defining the short story in terms of length, and in effect word count, bypasses the form completely, and is, as Graham Good claims, arbitrary. For Graham Good, differentiation based on length implies that fiction is 'a continuous, homogenous fabric'. He argues that short stories are adjacent to the novel, not in opposition, which makes definition tricky.<sup>7</sup> In the introduction to *New Short Story Theories*, Charles E. May argues that the problems of genre, and the division between the critics who deny the possibility of a definition beyond shortness, and those who believe that the short story's shortness or historical traditions have resulted in properties that distinguish it from the novel, rests on 'two different concepts of generic

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Rohrberger, ed., *Story to Anti-Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p.3-5.

<sup>5</sup> Axel Nissen, p. 181.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Friedman, 'Recent Short Story Theories' in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer (Baton Rouge and London; Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 5-20 (p.15).

<sup>7</sup> Graham Good, 'Notes on the novella', in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 147-164, (p. 147-8).



definition'.<sup>8</sup> 'The nay-sayers insist on a positivist definition that includes characteristics common to all examples of the short story that will sufficiently distinguish it from the novel. The pro-definition group is more inclined to adopt Ludwig Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" theory. They are interested in locating a network of similarities and relationships within examples of the form.'<sup>9</sup> The problem seems to hinge on whether the difference between the novel and the short story is one of kind or one of degree. But, the dominance of the novel, as Nissen points out, as the major narrative mode has led many critics to define the short story only by contrasting it to the novel, resulting often in denigration of the short story as a 'lesser' art form.<sup>10</sup> Short fiction theory does not seem able to get out of its identity crisis.

However, more profitable definitions go beyond the notion of length. Charles E. May has continually argued that there is 'an inherent relationship between a characteristic short story structure and its theme.'<sup>11</sup> For May, the short story is concerned with the sacred, the transcendent. Short stories, he claims in *Speaking of the Short Story*, 'are not really interested in defining human beings in social terms, but in more transcendent terms...short story writers deal with humans caught in the most complex and paradoxical dilemmas of what it means to be human and alone.' For May, short fiction goes beyond the social concerns and debates in literary theory about gender, class and race. They are about what it is to be 'human' because characters 'are placed alone on the human stage, and not in a social context'.<sup>12</sup>

In *Studies in Short Fiction*, Charles E. May has elaborated further on the problems of genre theory. He states that many critics have argued that 'genre definitions are of dubious value – either so exact that they completely stifle what they pretend to describe or so general that they can be applied to any literary work'<sup>13</sup>. However, May utilises theorists such as Todorov and Jameson, who have developed genre theory beyond tight prescription and over-generalisation to move short story theory forward. Frederic Jameson divides genre

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<sup>8</sup> Charles E. May, *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by. Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), p. xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Charles E. May, p. xvii.

<sup>10</sup> Axel Nissen, p.181.

<sup>11</sup> Charles E. May, *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> Charles E. May, *Speaking of the Short Story*, pp.181-188 (p.186-187).

<sup>13</sup> Charles E. May, 'Prolegomenon to a generic study of the short story', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 33 (1996), p.461-474 (pp.461).

study into 'the semantic approach...an attitude towards life' and 'the structural or syntactic approach', which is a 'historically bound fixed form'. Jameson argues that a mode is not bound to the given of a historical age, but persists through historical periods', so we must 'determine how, given the change in historical circumstances, new conventions take the place of old, outworn ones.'<sup>14</sup>

The search for a definition has in some ways narrowed the scope and possibility of short story theory and its ability to go beyond the question of 'what is a short story?' It also delimits the form by trying to find a totalizing theory, which is actually describing a *kind* of short story, be it Poe's gothic stories, which develop from the tale, the fairy tale, the romance, or the modern lyric short story.

### Forms of the Short Story: The 'Epical', the 'Lyric' and The Postmodern

The Russian formalist, B.M. Ejxenbaum claimed that short stories amassed all their weight towards the ending. He admits that he is not talking about all short stories. He is describing stories 'of action...leaving aside stories of the sketch or *skaz* type, typical, for instance, of Russian literature.'<sup>15</sup> These stories of action are the *kind* of story I argued Poe was defining. From Poe's thrillers, detective stories to 'twist in the tails', the end is the focal point of the story, in which a missing part of the narrative is revealed. Ejxenbaum describes this plot structure in warlike 'masculine' terms:

like a bomb dropped from an airplane, it must speed downwards so as to strike with its war-head full-force on the target...short story is a term referring exclusively to plot, one assuming a combination of two conditions: *small* size and *plot impact* on the ending. Conditions of this sort produce something totally distinct in aim and devices from the novel.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Charles E. May, p. 466.

<sup>15</sup> B.M. Ejxenbaum, 'O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story', in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press), pp. 81-88 (p.81).

<sup>16</sup> B.M. Ejxenbaum, p.81.



For Ejxenbaum, the primary feature is the ending. For later theorists such as Susan Lohafer and John Gerlach, the ending is the central characteristic of the form. Gerlach argues that 'the short story is that genre in which the anticipation of the ending is always present'.<sup>17</sup> However, the endings of modern, lyrical short stories work differently from the story described by Ejxenbaum.

The kind of story that Ejxenbaum is discussing is called the 'epical' by Eileen Baldeshwiler. It:

is marked by external action developed 'syllogistically' through characters fabricated mainly to forward plot, culminating in a decisive ending that sometimes affords a universal insight, and expressed in the serviceably inconspicuous language of prose realism.<sup>18</sup>

While Ejxenbaum is differentiating the short story from the novel, (he leaves out the stories Baldeshwiler is defining), Baldeshwiler is marking the difference between the modern short story, which she terms the 'lyrical' short story and the nineteenth-century short story defined by Poe and Ejxenbaum, which Baldeshwiler terms the 'epical'. Baldeshwiler argues that the 'lyrical short story' is not structured by plot, but by 'internal changes, moods, and feelings, utilizing a variety of structural patterns depending on the shape of the emotion itself.' It 'relies for the most part on the open ending...It is expressed by the condensed, evocative, often figurative language of the poem.' She points to the stories of Turgenev and Chekhov as the beginning of this type of story. In their work, language is used to express internal states of mind and the plot line consists of 'tracing complex emotions to a closing cadence utterly unlike the reasoned resolution of the conventional cause and effect narrative'.<sup>19</sup> Her analysis of writers of the 'lyric' story, such as Turgenev, Chekhov, Mansfield, and Woolf focuses on how the story is structured by emotional changes in the characters, tone and mood, rather than on conventional external plot:

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<sup>17</sup> John Gerlach, *Towards the End* (University of Alabama Press, 1985), p.160.

<sup>18</sup> Eileen Baldeshwiler, 'The Lyric Short Story: The Sketch of a History', in *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 231-241 (p.231).

<sup>19</sup> Eileen Baldeshwiler, p.234.

Besides the use of the emotional curve, other new patterns of story organisation are beginning to emerge, such as the alteration of scenes and moods for a surrealistic effect, the circling around a central dilemma or set of feelings, the record of a moment of intense feeling or perception which contains its own significant form.<sup>20</sup>

While Ejxenbaum uses the language of war and conflict, Baldeshwiler uses the language of music to convey the structure of 'lyrical' short stories. Stories are characterised by their mood, cadence and tone. Her work is the beginning of an attempt to find a language or 'grammar' in which to analyse the modern short story.

Charles E. May, along with Mary Rohrberger, argues that what defines the (modern) short story is its use of metaphor. Rohrberger differentiates between stories which are examples of social realism, in which 'meaning emerges primarily through simple irony...and probably exists mainly on surface level.' Whereas, in a 'true short story, meaning emerges through multivalence resulting from patterns of images that create symbolic substructures. Meaning is never so clear as to be easily summarised, and plots, or the lack of them, are simply one aspect of meaning.'<sup>21</sup> However, this definition privileges the poetic short story, the 'true' story over other forms, and in doing so simplifies and essentialises short stories in general. In this definition, as in May's, the lyric short story described above by Baldeshwiler is the only 'true' short story. As Farhat Iffekhsrudin says, 'Critics still point to modern stories as the quintessential examples of the short story form'.<sup>22</sup>

The 'open' ending has defined the modern lyric short story. But 'open' is not a simple concept. Chekhov famously stated:

My instinct tells me that at the end of a novel or short story, I must artfully concentrate for the reader an impression of the entire work, and therefore must

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<sup>20</sup> Eileen Baldeshwiler, p.234-235.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Mary Rohrberger, in *Speaking of the Short Story: Interviews With Contemporary Writers*, ed. by Farhat Iffekharuddin, Mary Roherberger and Maurice Lee (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp.211-218 (p.217).

<sup>22</sup> Farhat Iffekhsrudin, *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, ed. by Farhat Iffekhsrudin, Joseph Boyden, Joseph Longo and Mary Rohrberger (Westport: Praeger, 2003), p.xxviii.



casually mention something about those whom I have already presented. Perhaps I am in error.<sup>23</sup>

Here, he is arguing that the writer must bring together all the elements of the story, be they images, ideas or characters. This kind of ending draws together the emotional tones of the story, but does not close them off. What Chekov is saying is that even if an ending does not have the finality of traditional fiction, it does not end arbitrarily. Endings in short stories create meaning.

Some stories end with a turn, a revelation or epiphany, or an ambiguous image. There is an element of change, only the change is a revelation rather than development or evolution. For the short story writer Moira Crone, endings in short stories open outwards in that they suggest a lot more than they say. A short story:

is the ultimate metonymy, because it is the tiny part that suggests the whole – by its very tininess, it seems to imply a greater and greater world. I think of the moment in which the son in ‘Everything Which Rises must Converge’ looks up after he realises his mother has had a stroke: everything after will follow from this. No other word need be said.<sup>24</sup>

From the ending the reader intuits the character’s future; the reader knows what will happen without it being spelled out. For example, in Katherine Mansfield’s ‘Bliss’, the main character Bertha is exuberant and ecstatic till the final page where she sees her husband in an embrace with her special friend, Miss Fulton. When Miss Fulton has left:

Bertha simply ran over to the long windows.

‘Oh, what is to happen now?’ she cried.

But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Anton Chekov, ‘The Short Story’, in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp.195-8 (p.195).

<sup>24</sup> Moira Crone, *Speaking of the Short Story*, pp.85-6.

<sup>25</sup> Katherine Mansfield, ‘Bliss’, in *Katherine Mansfield: The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp 91-105 (p.105).

There is a revelation, a climax in the story, but no fixed resolution. The 'fall' of the story is minimal. 'Bliss', like other modern short stories, 'ends abruptly with a moment charged with impact, a convergence of rhetorical force, that fuses cognition and affect in symbolic significance.'<sup>26</sup> The story ends with an image of the pear tree, which, in its loveliness, is incongruous with Bertha's feelings. The ending is ambiguous, but the reader is left with no doubt that there has been a change in Bertha's life. The bubble of her happiness has burst, but the final image complicates the simple 'change' in the story.

### Literary Theory and the Short Story

Short story theory has, on the whole, remained separate from mainstream literary theory. With its focus on genre and formalism, it has, until recently, remained apart from debates around modernism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, Marxism and feminism; the mainstay of literary theory. In *Speaking of the Short Story*, Charles E. May, Mary Rohrberger and Susan Lohafer claim this was a conscious choice, a rebellion and movement away from literary theory. Lohafer was drawn to short story theory because it had 'a certain quirkiness, a maverick quality, a resistance to ideology. I did not have to be a devotee to Foucault or Lacan. I did not have to subscribe to any fashion of criticism.'<sup>27</sup> For Mary Rohrberger, short stories are often 'swallowed up by theories of narrativity or being taught by people who don't have the vaguest idea that there is a difference between longer and shorter fiction'.<sup>28</sup> These theorists were enticed by the 'outsider' status of the short story, but the continued separateness from literary theory (until recently) merely served to perpetuate the marginality of the short story without any of the political gains that marginality might offer.

As Mary Rohrberger argues, mainstream literary theory has often blurred the difference between short stories and the novel, and often discussed the novel, or the nineteenth-century novel in the term 'the classic realist text', and then used short stories as examples and illustrations. This is evidenced in Roland Barthes classic work *S/Z*, which discusses the

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<sup>26</sup> *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*, ed. by Farhat Iftkharuddin, Joseph Boyden, Mary Rohrberger and Jale Claudet (Westport: Praeger, 2003), p.xiii.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Lohafer, *Speaking of the Short Story*, p.171.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Rohrberger, *Speaking of the Short Story*, p.212.



story 'Sarrasine', and Catherine Belsey's analysis of Sherlock Holmes short stories. In these cases it could be argued that the (classic nineteenth-century) short story fits the theories of the classic realist text better than novels.

Literary theory has sought to place texts in hierarchies: the 'readable' and 'writerly' text of Colin MacCabe and Catherine Belsey draws on the work of Roland Barthes, Pierre Macheray, Bertold Brecht and Luis Althusser and Emile Benveniste and privileges the 'writerly text'. Catherine Belsey argues that classic realism or Benveniste's 'declarative' text imparts 'knowledge to a reader whose position is thereby stabilised, through a privileged discourse which is in varying degrees invisible.' On the other hand, the 'interrogative' or 'writerly text' 'disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with the unified subject of the enunciation'.<sup>29</sup> It 'invites the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises' by being open, refusing a single point of view and by drawing attention to its textuality. Following the Brechtian and Althusserian argument, in 'writerly' or 'interrogative' texts, the reader is not interpolated into the fictional world.

Short story theory, as I have discussed, has sought to differentiate the short story from the novel. For example, Todorov has argued that 'there is no time, in reading a short work, to forget it is only 'literature' and not 'life''.<sup>30</sup> In 'Things Out of Words: Towards A Poetics of Short Fiction' Clare Hanson argues that the short story is a more 'literary' form than the novel, it has a 'self-referential, free-standing linguistic quality', which is felt 'as some kind of disjunction between reader and text. Drawing on Todorov, she agrees that the reader cannot 'lapse into assumptions that what she/he is reading about is 'life'.<sup>31</sup> However, how does this explain the use of short stories as examples of 'classic realist texts' in the above literary theory? As discussed, other theorists differentiate between types of short stories, between the 'end-heavy' 'epical' short story and the lyric short story, to use Baldeshwiler's terms. Obvious parallels can be drawn between the traditional 'end-heavy' short story, with the definite closure and unity of meaning and the 'readable' text, such as the Sherlock Holmes stories, which Belsey analyses, as well as formal similarities

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<sup>29</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1980), p.91.

<sup>30</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p.107.

<sup>31</sup> Clare Hanson, 'Things Out of Words: Towards a Poetics of Short Fiction', *Re-Reading the Short Story*, ed. by Clare Hanson (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp22-33(p.30).



between the writerly text and the open-ended, modernist lyric short story, and postmodern short fiction that foregrounds its fictionality.

This post-structuralist argument advocates the open, 'writerly' short story as being progressive and political. Politics is seen in terms of form: if a text is disruptive, it is progressive. This distinction is at odds with Anglo-American feminist criticism and some post-colonial criticism, which argues for the necessity of the notion of the author and an idea of the text as communication and window of communication between the author and reader. While criticism following the Marxist and structuralist tradition has sought to dethrone the author, un-fix the subject and contextualise the meanings the text generates within specific cultural paradigms, some post-colonial and Anglo-American criticism has re-centred the author, and argued this necessity because they have been previously denied subjectivity. Writers such as Toni Morrison reinstate the authentic humanist subject, albeit with a difference. However, this is a move which Toril Moi criticises because its 'radical analysis of sexual politics still remains entangled with depoliticising theoretical paradigms' or what she also describes as 'the lineage of male-centred humanism'.<sup>32</sup>

However, I would argue that while formal disruption is important, no text is inherently more 'progressive' than another. Some innovative contemporary fiction is left with little political effect. Neither are short stories of themselves more 'political' or progressive than novels, as this argument would circumvent the specificity of individual stories and collections within their cultural circumstances. Disruption, textual effect, playfulness with point of view and authorial intrusion do not necessarily mean a text is more progressive without reference to its content, authorial intention, as well as its cultural production and reception. What MacCabe and Belsey leave out of their argument is power and cultural context; politics is both inside and outside a text. Who is writing the story, how the meanings are generated and how and when the story is read are also important.

The politics of critical theory has likewise lost its efficacy. Returning to the quotations from *Speaking of the Short Story*, it is precisely the repetition of literary theory's readings of texts, which are reproduced and are sometimes no longer innovative themselves that has drawn theorists to short story theory. In her work on cognitive approaches to short stories

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<sup>32</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p.87.



and how we read them, Susan Lohafer claims she has tried to get out of the 'well-worn grooves of cultural criticism', in which a story's message is 'pre-packaged' and responses to texts are 'pre-formulated'. In this criticism, the complexity of literature is lost.<sup>33</sup> However, this is no argument against postmodern or innovative writing, or indeed literary theory. As I will discuss later, the narrative strategies and innovation in contemporary writing still retain political effect, and the recent merging of literary theory with short story theory in books such as *Postmodern Approaches to Short Fiction* and *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction* analysis have taken short story theory into new directions.

### The Postmodern Short Story

In his introduction to the 1971 anthology, *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Short Fiction*, Philip Stevick claims that the form of the modern short story had become fixed and a given:

In the early years of the [twentieth] century, short fiction challenges the received notions of time and space, continuity and coherence, artistic illusion and psychological process just as powerfully and successfully as longer fiction does. It puzzles and troubles its readers with its artistic audacity. And it includes some of the most extraordinary art of our time, as passionate in its craftsmanship, as controlled in its structure, as penetrating in its vision as art of any kind. But then a kind of fatigue overtakes the form, changing short fiction into perhaps the most conservative art of mid century, during the nineteen-fifties probably the single mode of artistic expression most self-imitative.<sup>34</sup>

This introduction pre-empts the theorisation of postmodern literature and, in particular, the short fiction of Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover and John Barth. In the preface to *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*, Farhat Iftekharuddin outlines how 'postmodern literary works' are marked by 'fragmentation, parody and self-reflexivity', which is a reaction to the 'strictures of modernism'. This has resulted from a questioning of

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<sup>33</sup> *Speaking of the Short Story*, p.168.

<sup>34</sup> *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Short Fiction*, ed. by Philip Stevick (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. xi-xii.

the growth of modernity, of what constitutes 'reality' and of the process of acquiring knowledge. Postmodern works, Iftekharuddin argues, seek to:

redefine indigenous histories that create different realities counter to the accepted realities of the Western world, that has no place say for magical realism, because it defies logic and is not grounded in silence. Postmodern literary works range from extreme textual reduction to prolific excess, a mockery against form.<sup>35</sup>

Postmodern short fiction has broken the unity of the modern (lyric) short story. For John Barth, postmodern writing is not only a reaction against modernism, but part of 'how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our own time into material and means for his own work'.<sup>36</sup> While John Barth questioned the fiction making processes of fiction and the difference between illusion and reality in *Lost in the Funhouse*, Donald Barthelme used collage and fragmentation in stories such as 'Views of My Father Weeping' and 'Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning' to break up chronology and linearity, and question how we make meaning of a story.<sup>37</sup> For David Gates, who introduces the most recent edition of Donald Bartheleme's *60 Stories*, Barthelme's fiction subverts 'the still standard Chekhovian template: modest deeds of modest people leading up to a modest epiphany'. Similarly to Philip Stevick, who argues that you can plot the narrative arc of the modern short story on a graph, David Gates claims that most stories are 'constructed mousetrap-like to supply, at the finish, a tiny insight typically having to do with innocence violated'.<sup>38</sup>

But since the innovation of the seventies, recent 'postmodern' fiction has been criticised for its lack of innovation and for merely copying the work of Barth and Barthelme. For Kevin Dettmar, the stories in *Transgressions: The Iowa Anthology of Innovative Fiction*, 'written in the '90s, retain all the transgressive power of the Beatles' "Revolution" morphed

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<sup>35</sup> Farhat Iftekharuddin, *The Postmodern Short Story: Issues and Forms*, ed. by Farhat Iffekhsrrudin, Joseph Boyden, Mary Rohrberger and Jaie Claudet (Westport; Praeger, 2003), p.5-6.

<sup>36</sup> John Barth, quoted by Farhat Iftekharuddin, p.7.

<sup>37</sup> John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New Work: Anchor Books, 1988).

<sup>38</sup> David Gates, 'introduction' in Donald Barthelme, *Sixty Stories* (London: Penguin, 1981, 2003), p.ix.



into a Nike commercial.’<sup>39</sup> Dettmar claims that these stories are cold laboratory experiments in metafiction. Likewise, in ‘Empty Rhetoric and the American Literary Magazine’, Daniel Green surveys contemporary journals that publish short fiction, such as *Ploughshares* and *The Paris Review* and finds them entrenched in a kind of neo-realism. If there is any kind of experiment, it is the ‘facile manipulation of the outward features of the well-made story.’ He argues that:

the experimentation in these stories is eminently safe, the departures from narrative norms readily enough assimilated to those norms once such purely tactical manoeuvring - e.g., the personification of human gender relations in the activity of insects given voice as characters - is allowed for. Far from challenging the reader to an awareness of the yet-unexplored possibilities of language and of the mutable nature of literary form and thus to play an active part in the creation of the literary experience itself, such fiction reassures its reader that the usual responses will do and reinforces the underlying assumption that this kind of reassurance is more or less essential to a ‘good read’.<sup>40</sup>

For Dettman and Green, recent ‘experimental’ fiction is rarely innovative at all and has lost its political efficacy. This writing is gimmicky and superficial. Some might argue that they are examples of the depthlessness of postmodern and concern with play, surfaces and parody, but for Dettmar these techniques become no more than stylistic tricks and textual effect.

For Erin Fallon, contemporary short fiction has many possibilities:

Meta-fiction, magic realism and other postmodern styles are noticeable ‘breakaways’ in recent short fiction, but other, perhaps subtler tendencies exist. Besides the fractured experience, the parodies of fantasy and myth and the surreal fabulations, more and more critics are discussing the so-called minimalism of

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<sup>39</sup> Kevin J.H.Dettmar, ‘Transgressions: The Iowa Anthology of Innovative Fiction’, *Studies in Short Fiction*, Spring (1996) <[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2455/is\\_n2\\_v33/ai\\_20831967/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2455/is_n2_v33/ai_20831967/)> [last accessed 21.11.09].

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Green, ‘Empty Rhetoric and the American Literary Magazine’, *Context*, Daley Archive Press, <<http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/article/show/234>> [last accessed 21.11.09].

writers such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, and Bobbie Ann Mason...Today short story writers produce every imaginable type of story: minimalist, postmodern, and experimental, traditional plot-irony and lots of modernist epiphany stories.

Some critics attend to these 'small' innovations. For example, Miriam Marty Clark argues that:

Unlike the complex, modernist short story, grounded in image and metaphor and moving toward revelation, many stories of the last decade and a half are marked by depthlessness, incoherence and ephemerality.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, in the essay 'Johnny Panic and the Pleasures of Disruption',<sup>42</sup> Robert Hampson draws on Roland Barthes distinction between the 'text of pleasure', which 'contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading' and the 'text of bliss' that 'discomforts...unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions...'<sup>43</sup> This kind of text that unsettles the reader's expectations does not only feature in the work of avant-garde writers, but also more subtly in Alice Munro's fiction. Among a number of stories, Hampson analyses Alice Munro's 'How I Met My Husband'. The title of the story sets up expectations in the reader: it is about how the narrator met her husband, but most of the story is about a pilot who promises to write, but never does. Who she marries is the mailman who comes in at the end of the story. The story does 'technically fulfil' the reader's expectations, but, Hampson argues, 'the reader cannot help feeling cheated by this ending.' However, the ending eschews the reader's interpretation and 'identifies the end of interpretation as the security and comfort of the interpreter'.<sup>44</sup>

Many recent writers do not break this contract with the reader as thoroughly as Donald Barthelme, but there are many recent writers who innovatively eschew expectations, both of those of traditional fiction and postmodern writing as well. For example, magical realism in the work of Isabel Allende and Salman Rushdie takes a macabre turn in the

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<sup>41</sup> Miriam Marty Clark, 'Contemporary Short Fiction and the Postmodern Condition', *Studies in Short Fiction*, 32:2 (1995), p.147-160 (p.2).

<sup>42</sup> Robert Hampson, 'Johnny Panic and the Pleasures of Disruption', in *Re-Reading the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp 69-85.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasures of the Text* quoted in 'Johnny Panic and the Pleasures of Disruption', p.69.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Hampson, p.72.



work of Hassan Blasim. The minimalism of Raymond Carver and Bobbie Ann Mason is more stylised, elliptical and poetic in Amy Hempel's stories. Recent examples of metafiction are not mere rewrites of *Lost in the Funhouse*. Amy Hempel's 'The Harvest' questions how we fictionalise our experiences and Ali Smith's 'True Short Story' asks what a short story is. These writers will be further discussed in succeeding sections.

### Reading as a Critic and Reading as a Writer: The Problems

Andrew K. Kennedy, who is a writer, critic and teacher, claims that while writing his article for *The Art of Brevity*:

Two persons are trying out an inner dialogue in this discussion: first, the writer of the stories working intuitively, groping towards narrative targets with a mind more or less successfully purified of the buzz of abstractions, against the second, the literary critic and teacher, tolerably well informed about some questions of narrative theory but certainly not a contributor to this "field". It must be said (who is saying this?) that these two persons do not always communicate well with each other, frequently ignoring each other's competence altogether.<sup>45</sup>

Kennedy highlights the double self or double identity of the practitioner-critic. However, Kennedy goes on to argue that these two identities or personas are not completely separate. In writing 'there is no substitute for clarity, and that necessarily involves reflecting on what one is constructing.'<sup>46</sup> I would argue that these two identities are in fact always part of the writing process. The early drafts of writing, whether using 'free writing' or jotting down ideas, is in some way instinctive while 'groping towards narrative targets'. In the early stages of writing there is a sense of 'letting go' and turning off the internal critic. The 'editorial' stage is about sitting back from the drafts and involves the clarity Kennedy discusses. This can bring in knowledge of form and writing techniques as well as theory.

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<sup>45</sup> Andrew K. Kennedy, 'Writing Short Stories: With Reflections on Occasion, Tonality and Direction' in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, ed. by Per Winter, Jakob Lothe, and Hans Skei (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), pp.26-31 (p.26).

<sup>46</sup> Andrew K. Kennedy, p.26-27.

During the process of writing this collection of stories it was on a certain level useful to know what kind of story I was writing, to reflect on 'what one is constructing'. Writers learn to write from reading, from other writers. An understanding of other writers' work is present on many levels. As a writer, I cannot read 'literary theory' and consciously apply it to my stories, but I could not argue that I somehow write with what I have studied wiped clean from my mind; during this whole process, a knowledge of form, technique and theory is *a priori* and affects every stage, consciously or unconsciously.

I have been studying literature as long as I have been writing; my writing comes out of reading and studying literature, so for me these two activities are not mutually exclusive. This PhD began as a critical PhD, moved towards the short story and in the end produced this creative PhD. This commentary draws on and is influenced by what I previously studied. The past few years of research into the short story, the domestic and feminism are present in this commentary. For me, there is no clear distinction between any theoretical and critical research I have done and my creative writing.

However as practitioners, writers approach short stories from the other 'end' to critics. Whereas for critics, short stories are always read in a finished form or text, writers experience their stories and other writers' stories (when they workshop each other's work) as something in process. I am not trying to suggest that writers have a superior insight to critics, but there might be a different kind of approach because with each piece of writing, there is a new form and politics, a new theory. For Isabel Allende, the endings of stories are intuitive. She often knows what the ending would be, but she says, 'I know it at a gut level; I don't know it intellectually...If I had to tell you the end before writing I wouldn't know, but when I start writing, everything seems to flow in a very natural way and ends up in a surprise for me.' In one story, trying to impose a 'happy ending' did not work. Isabel Allende realised she had not followed the instincts of the characters. 'So I just let the characters talk for themselves, and I got a very strange ending that is difficult to explain, but that's what they wanted.'<sup>47</sup> For Allende, the creative process is not intellectually known; it highlights the element of discovery in writing. A certain form or ending cannot be forced on a story. Theory or indeed politics is created in practice. Whether a writer is

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<sup>47</sup> Isabel Allende, *Speaking of the Short Story: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*, ed. by Farhat Iftekharruddin (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), pp. 3-14 (p.4-5).



writing within a certain form or bending the writing 'rules' or writing innovatively, the form creates meanings in different ways. Each story or text writes its own politics, particular to that act of writing.

### **Frank O'Connor and Nadine Gordimer: Two Views on the Short Story**

A number of short story writers have written theoretically about the short story. I will focus on Frank O'Connor and Nadine Gordimer's views. Both writers compare how the short story and the novel represent human experience. Gordimer argues that the short story is more equipped to attempt to capture 'ultimate reality – another term for the quality of human life' because:

Each of us has a thousand lives and a novel gives a character only one. The novelist may juggle about with chronology and throw narrative overboard; all the time his characters have the reader by the hand, there is a consistency of relationship throughout the experience that cannot and does not convey the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness.<sup>48</sup>

This definition taps in to something about the short story, but on the other hand, in doing so it has to denigrate and simplify the novel. Perhaps the pleasure of reading the novel is precisely this 'leading by the hand', the identification with the character and continuity of the reading experience, which you do not have in short stories. Taking away the criticism of the novel, this notion of how we come into contact with characters in short fiction is insightful. We are only with the characters for a short period of time so the contact with a character in the short story is like 'the flash of fireflies'. After reading a short story you are left puzzling. What did just happen? What did they mean? Who was that? Though this does not offer the same satisfaction and safety as novels, the short story taps into the unknowability of others; our knowledge of others is partial.

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<sup>48</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Flash of Fireflies', *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 263-267 (p.264).

This incomplete knowledge of others is linked to a lack of certainty in general. Gordimer claims that:

short story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment. Ideally they have learned to do so without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point. How the characters will appear, think, behave, comprehend, tomorrow or any other time in their lives, is irrelevant. A discrete moment of truth is aimed at – not the moment of truth, because the short story does not deal in cumulatives.<sup>49</sup>

This discrete moment of truth is the hallmark of the modern short story, as we have discussed in the work of May and Baldeshwiler. Barthelme criticises this ‘discrete moment of truth’ as being ‘a modest insight by a modest person’. However, this notion of the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fragmentary is not far away from Barthelme’s work. I find this definition more useful than Charles E. May’s notions of the transcendental, which takes the short story out of the social and political realm. As I will discuss later, Nadine Gordimer’s short stories (as well as her novels) are intensely political.

In *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O’Connor argues that the distinction between the novel and short story is not formal but ideological:

The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilised society, of man as an animal who lives in a community, as in Jane Austen and Trollope it obviously does; but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.<sup>50</sup>

O’Connor’s book *The Lonely Voice* has been very influential. This definition has been read by Charles E. May to mean that ‘characters are placed alone on the human stage, and not in a social context’, which means stories are concerned ‘with the universals of human experience rather than the particular circumstances of time and place.’ Short stories may deal with social issues, but they go beyond the social to explore what it means ‘to be

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<sup>49</sup> Nadine Gordimer, p.265.

<sup>50</sup> Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice* (Hoboken, New Jersey; Melville House Publishing, 2004), p.20.



human and alone.’<sup>51</sup> This view depoliticises the short story. While for May, the short story is about ‘universals’, I would argue that O’Connor emphasises the opposite. He argues that the main character in novels (he admits this is a generalisation and many novels do have anti-heroes too) is often an ‘everyman’ or hero with whom the reader can identify, but the characters in short stories are often outsiders or ‘little men’. This ‘little man’ first appeared in fiction in Gogol’s ‘The Overcoat’.<sup>52</sup> O’Connor claims this character is absurd and mediocre, and the reader cannot so easily identify with him. Of course, this kind of generalisation simplifies both the novel and short story. But while for May, this idea of the outsider, the character on his own takes the short story outside of the social realm and outside of politics, for me it is precisely this notion of the outside that makes short stories political. This focus on the ‘little man’, and ‘the submerged population group’, places those on the outside at the centre of the story. While Gordimer’s and O’Connor’s views are not as developed as some of the theories discussed in the previous sections, they are in some ways more suggestive and resonant and not deterministic or delimiting. They look at the form and see what potential it has to give meaning to personal and social experience. But like other theories of genre, these views fail to drag the short story out of its dichotomy with the novel.

Ali Smith’s ‘True Short Story’ also questions the difference between the short story and the novel. It begins in a cafe and the narrator (who she claims is Ali Smith herself) overhears an old and young man comparing the short story to the novel. The two men say the novel is ‘a flabby old whore’ while the short story is ‘a nimble goddess, a slim nymph’.<sup>53</sup> The story blends a metafictional layer, the myth of ‘Echo’ and the story of her friend Kasia, who is having chemotherapy and whose ‘tireless articulacy’ meant a lot of women could receive a life saving cancer drug. In this story, the politics is about the ability or opportunity to speak. The loss of women’s voices is ‘echoed’ through the myth of Echo (who loses her voice) and women’s ability to ‘speak’ of the short story in academic settings, which enables another kind of life saving ‘speaking’ in the very ‘real’ distribution of cancer drugs (which belies Charles E. May’s dismissal of the social and political in short fiction). The sexual (and sexist) descriptions of the short story and novel, and the

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<sup>51</sup> Charles E. May, *Speaking of the Short Story*, p.186-7.

<sup>52</sup> Frank O’Connor, p.16-17.

<sup>53</sup> Ali Smith, ‘True Short Story’, in *The First Person and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), pp.3-17 (p.4).

'silencing' of women is undermined and reversed by multiple quoted definitions at the end of the story and the final definition, in which the short story is not a like a nymph because of her sexual allure:

So when is the short story like a nymph?

When the echo of it answers back.<sup>54</sup>

Partway through this story, the story stops comparing short fiction with the novel and takes it into other territory. This final answer to 'when is the short story like a nymph?' highlights its power to give voice to experience, to the voiceless, as well as to be subversive. For me the politics of the short story lies in this echo that answers back to the dominant culture by the outsider, the strange, the weird, the odd, the disaffected, those from different minority groups: those without voice.

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<sup>54</sup> Ali Smith, p.17.



## Section 2:

### *When I Get Home: Genesis and Theory*

This collection developed out of and alongside my research into the domestic and short stories. It also developed out of a cycle of stories I published in 2006, which were set on the same bus driving through South Manchester.<sup>55</sup> Some of the stories focused on characters with illness or disability. Other touched on themes of alienation, loss, dispossession, exile, asylum, and the effects of conflict. I initially wanted to write a novel-in-stories or a longer story cycle, developing the idea of public transport. I did not want to write a novel, but I was aware that publishing short fiction as an unknown writer is difficult. However, trying to force my ideas for very different stories into a strict structure stalled my writing completely; what worked for five stories did not necessarily work for fifteen. So I decided to work on the stories individually, and let any links emerge during the process itself.

For many writers there is a mystery at the heart of inspiration. They testify to the impossibility of explaining the creative process. Writing a critical commentary and studying creative writing is claiming that there is something explicable about the process; it is not all mystery and flashes of inspiration. However, writers do talk of this notion of inspiration. Rose Tremain claims that many of her novels develop out of a 'first mystery', which is often an image. For her novel, *The Swimming Pool Season*, this was a waking dream in which there was the 'sequence of images, carrying in it the idea of sudden transformation or transcendence'. This idea goes towards trying to explain 'one part of the process of novel writing – that part in which the imagination conjures images and the controlling authorial mind gives them context and meaning.' By the end of the novel, this 'first mystery' is unrecognisable. It has developed into a character, situation and story.<sup>56</sup>

For Marina Warner and Hilary Mantel the process is different. Warner's ideas are rooted in research, art, mythological figures and her family history in the Caribbean. Hilary Mantel is 'ideas-driven'. She says she has 'a talent for seeing the connections between things, and finding a dramatic form for abstract ideas. It seems to me that my books are ideas driven –

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<sup>55</sup>, Jane Roger, Polly Clark and Zoe Lambert, *Ellipsis 2* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> Rose Tremain, 'The First Mystery', in *The Agony and the Ego*, ed. by Clare Boylan (London: Penguin, 1993), p.3-6.

they are a dramatic expression of what interests me or preoccupies me or obsesses me at the time.’<sup>57</sup> However, Richard Ford questions these kinds of comments. In an interview, he expresses doubt on his own account about the origin of his story ‘Going to the Dogs’. At first he claims it developed from a look he saw on Raymond Carver’s face after Carver had won a bet. Then he admits this story might just be ‘a convenience of my memory.’ Interestingly, Richard Ford argues that the form of the short story precedes his ideas: ‘So first there was a thing called the short story, and I work and I find a way to inhabit it.’<sup>58</sup> Ford admits he is writing from within a form or genre with its expectations and conventions.

For me, after a story is written, it is sometimes hard to remember where the ideas came from. In my short stories, there was a similar ‘first mystery’, a moment or idea that developed into a story shape. For me, this ‘first mystery’ is more like a nugget: generative idea, piece of research or image. It’s a nugget because it can be picked at, developed and shaped. It is malleable. But I am also aware that I am working within a genre, a form. I see this form as malleable, changeable, not fixed; a form that with each story I try to change and develop. When this does not happen, my writing has become repetitive. In developing from and emerging out of the *Ellipsis 2* stories, the initial drafts of ‘33 Bullets’ and ‘To Basra’ repeated the structure of the earlier stories. In doing so, the stories became static and stale.

The stories have varied ‘nuggets’. They have developed from stories told to me, or research or specific memories. For ‘The War Tour’, the nugget was a photograph of a goat being led out of the tunnel in Sarajevo. My memory of this photo developed into the story. Some of the stories developed out of stories told to me by friends. ‘To Basra’ was motivated by a story from a friend whose cousin was encouraged to join the army to ‘make something of himself’. ‘Significant Objects’ developed from stories told in my family. In ‘Lebensborn’, the nugget was a friend’s unfinished research into the *Lebensborn* in Norway and the stories she told me about what happened to these women. ‘33 Bullets’

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<sup>57</sup> Hilary Mantel, ‘Growing a Tale’, in *The Agony and the Ego*, ed. by Clare Boylan (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 37.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Ford, ‘An Interview With Richard Ford’, in *Speaking of the Short Story: Interviews with Contemporary Writers*, ed. by Farhat Iftekharuddin, Mary Rothberger and Maurice Lee (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp. 107-122 (p.111-112).



developed from research and reading. The other strand of stories in this collection developed from earlier stories drafts of stories about childhood and adolescence, and from memories. 'Thermal Vest', had autobiographical beginnings about bullying and the memory of being cold. This story generated 'The New Girl' as I tried to write from the perspective of a bully.<sup>59</sup>

### Short Story Theory and *When I Get Home*

My early Ellipsis stories are written in the modern lyric mode. Rather than showing the external events and building to a closed ending, many of my stories portray inner emotions and mood, as well as an inner change in the character. A number of stories focus on the 'present moment' and structure the story around a short period of time in a character's life, with flashbacks to other moments in their life. These stories could have been narrated in a more linear or chronological manner, beginning further back in their life and narrating the story over a longer period of time. John Gerlach argues that the short story, rather than condensing a longer tale into a short period of time, 'highlights an incident small and slight in itself, presenting it so that the reader must imagine a much larger context. The incident selected would be deepened by implied extensions as to suggest both the past and the future'<sup>60</sup>. I have chosen to structure the stories in this way and focus on the present moment with flashbacks of past events because the stories were not about character development and growth. The stories are glimpses, or to use Gordimer's term 'flashes' of the characters. The structure and modern lyric form was synonymous with the character's static situation, which is in some ways out of their control. A different, more chronological, 'novelistic' structure would focus on change and development, cause and effect and would have different implications. As Jean Pickering argues in 'Time and the Short story', the short story emphasises 'stasis as opposed to process'.<sup>61</sup>

'To Basra', 'Fishfinger' and 'Thermal Vest' are lyric short stories narrated in the first person. They focus on a short period of time and single change or moment in the character.

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<sup>59</sup> I will give more detail about the development of these stories in later sections.

<sup>60</sup> John Gerlach, p.108.

<sup>61</sup> Jean Pickering, 'Time and the Short Story', in *Re-Reading the Short Story*, ed. by Clare Hanson (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), pp 45-54 (p. 49).

But these stories do not focus solely on the present moment. The stories are, to use Gordimer's term, a 'flash' of the character, but they involve two moments in their lives. They are not just of 'the present moment'. As in *Ellipsis 2*, these stories involve two stories: the story narrated in the present moment and an event that has happened in the past that effects and determines the present. The story of the present is the revelation of this past event. In 'To Basra' there is the story of the present moment of the narration, of Phil returning home and the story of what happened to him in Iraq, which he tells to the boy in the park. In 'Fishfinger', there are two intertwining moments: the present moment on the canal and the story of the narrator's mother's suicide. This concentration of two moments shows how the characters are haunted by their pasts and try to make sense of them by narrating them. The stories are about telling stories. The idea of stories within stories developed into the telling of stories. In 'To Basra' Phil tells his story to the boy, in 'Down Duchy Road', Margery tells the narrator about her abusive husband and in 'The War Tour', the story about the siege is also told to the narrator. Representing this act of narration within the narrative was difficult and felt a little repetitive. This is an issue I will return to in the section on ethics.

The form of the lyric short story did not always work. The short, momentary, slice of life structure did not work in 'The Waiting Room' (which became '33 Bullets'). This structural technique had become a structural habit and the story ended up static and repetitive. It said nothing new. 'The Waiting Room'/'33 Bullets' was originally situated in a train station. Devrim was sleeping rough and destitute. He was trying to complete his work on Kurdish poets, but he did not have a pen. The action of the present moment was interspersed by memories of the past, using flashback. The story therefore had two time lines, the present moment of the story and a past story told in flashback and 'remembered' moments. But nothing happened in the present; there was no inner change. He was static and the story became static. While some stories are successfully 'slices of life' and present the characters' emotions and feelings, there was something missing in this story. This is no argument for the necessity of 'conflict', but its lack was felt here. I realised what was missing from the story was how Devrim got from the detention centre (the scenes in the flashback) to his present destitute situation.



In this early draft, Japhet (who also appears in 'What He Doesn't Tell Her') commits suicide in the detention centre. Though there have been many suicides in detention centres in the past few years, I became uneasy about representing this. Instead, I wanted something more hopeful, something anarchic. Instead of conveying his experiences through flash back and free indirect speech, I tried to convey them through the court documents. The structure of the story changed. The scenes of Devrim and Japhet were interspersed with sections of Devrim's court documents and excerpts of Devrim's unfinished essay on Kurdish poets. The story at the 'heart' of the story is the story of the poem '33 Bullets' by Ahmed Arif. This story changed from a failed lyric short story to something more fragmentary.

While I highlighted the official 'record' and court documents, in the story 'The Reality and the Record', Hassan Blasim takes the reader into a nightmare dreamscape and surreal experience in Iraq that disrupts the hierarchy of record over personal experience.<sup>62</sup> The story he tells immigration is not provable or logical and the narrator goes mad at the end of the story. 'The Reality and the Record' and Roy Kesey's 'Martin' use surrealism to undermine the control of the discourses of immigration and psychiatry. In 'Martin', the story is written as a psychiatric evaluation document, which reveals that Martin 'suffers from the delusion that he is a guitar string'.<sup>63</sup> But his 'physical description' tells us that:

Martin is approximately thirty-one inches long and 0.04 inches in diameter...He is apparently both bronze-wound and hand-silked.<sup>64</sup>

The language of psychiatric medicine is humorously parodied as the reader realises Martin is a guitar string. In '33 Bullets', I used the court documentation to filter Devrim's experiences. But instead of using surrealism and parody to undermine these discourse of the immigration process, the documents become part of the story; they are what Devrim burns and what causes the fire.

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<sup>62</sup> Hassan Blasim, 'The Reality and The Record', in *The Madman of Freedom Square* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2009), pp.1-11.

<sup>63</sup> Roy Kesey, 'Martin', in *All Over* (Westland: Dzanc Books, 2007), pp.117-121 (p.117).

<sup>64</sup> Roy Kesey, p.118.

'Lebensborn' is a long short story at 9,000 words and longer than most contemporary short fiction. All of the stories in Jhumpa Lahari's collection *Unaccustomed Earth* are longer than usual, and many of Alice Munro's are longer.<sup>65</sup> The shape of this story is different to the lyric short story, but the story is still within the short time frame of Hanna's return home from her mother's funeral. The second draft of the story was 5,000 words long and in some ways felt incomplete. Again, it felt unfinished. The story was expanding. In some ways, I wondered whether this story was actually meant to be a much longer narrative, perhaps even material for a novel or novella. But in developing it, there would have to be a bigger time scale, a more chronological and developmental structure.

In a number of my stories the endings were not 'open'; they just ended arbitrarily and did not achieve the simplicity and implication of stories like Colm Toibin's 'A Song'. In this story an estranged son accidentally sees his mother in a pub, where she is performing. He hides at the back of the pub and listens to her sing. The story does not use flashback to show their past, but the character/narrator gives information about their relationship using free indirect discourse. The story uses the song as an image and metonym to show and develop and finally end their relationship. The story covers a short period of time; the length of the song, but builds up to a narrative 'climax' in the end of the song, after which the character slips outside and sits in his car so he does not have to face his mother and hoping his friends would not notice his disquiet:

Outside, as the car of the evening with its full headlights on approached, he was shaking. He knew he would have to be careful to say nothing more, to pretend that it had been an ordinary evening. It would all be forgotten; they would play and sing into the small hours. He sat in the car and waited in the darkness for the others to come.<sup>66</sup>

Though the story ends with him waiting in the car, the reader knows he has avoided a confrontation with his mother (though they have done 'battle' during the song and during the performance of the song there is the essence of their relationship) and he is not even

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<sup>65</sup> Jhumpa Lahari, *Unaccustomed Earth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> 'A Song' Colm Toibin, *Mothers and Sons* (London: Picador, 2006), p.55.



sure whether she recognised him. The ‘moment’ of the song and his departure from the pub move outwards and give the reader a sense of their lives.

In some of my stories the ending is always in sight; it is the reason for the story; its endpoint. These stories are written easily. In other, the situation or character is the reason, and the ending is not as important. The endings to these stories are harder to find. In early drafts of my stories, the endings were incomplete and abrupt. They were dissatisfying, as if I had just stopped writing. For these stories, the ‘editorial’ mind came in to play. I had to figure out what they were about, what they were trying to say. The ending in early drafts of ‘Lad Lazarus’ was dissatisfactory. It ended with David at the bus stop, waiting for Dia to arrive. Feedback suggested the story was not finished. So I continued the story: Dia arrives on the bus and demands to be shown where the park is, so she can carry on with her plan. David takes her there and then makes advances. While writing this ending I did not know that this is what he would do. But while writing it I realised he did not want death, he wanted sex. This ending enabled the two stories to mirror each other.

In my subsequent short stories I attempted to go beyond the lyric mode. In ‘The War Tour’ and ‘The Biography of Mrs Charlotte Manning’ I drew on Hassan Blasim’s and Tim O’Brien’s self-reflexivity and positioning of the author of the collection in the stories. In Blasim’s ‘Ali’s Bag’ the narrator confides with the reader that:

More than once it has occurred to me that I will spend my life writing about the events and surreal happenings I have experienced along the routes taken by undocumented migrants. It’s my cancer and I do not know how it can be cured. I’m afraid I might meet a comic end like the Iraqi writer Khalid al-Hamrani.<sup>67</sup>

In Hassan Blasim’s and Tim O’Brien’s work, placing the author/narrator in the stories is not just a gimmick. The ‘I’ of ‘The Biography’ is not just a gimmick either. The narrator is the ‘writer’ of this short story collection and claims to have been side tracked by a bibliography on women’s travel narratives. The story quotes from fictitious diary entries and letters to portray the woman’s emigration to Tasmania. I wanted to write about a

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<sup>67</sup> Hassan Blasim, ‘Ali’s Bag’, in *The Madman of Freedom Square*, (Manchester: Comma Press, 2009), pp.61-67 (p.62).

woman who was complicit in the situation but is also, or at least sees herself as powerless in the situation.

In 'Significant Objects in My Grandmother's Life', the story is a series of vignettes, each about an object of the narrator's grandmother. The idea of showing a life through a sequence of moments was inspired by Lorrie Moore's story 'How to Talk to Your Mother (notes)'<sup>68</sup>. In this story, the diary entries move backwards in time to her birth. The narrative is structured by succeeding entries explaining preceding information. The structure enables the story to portray the narrator's changing relationship with her mother through suggestion, metaphor, evocative detail and the mock self-help manual style. The story begins:

1982: Without her, for years now, murmur at the defrosting refrigerator, 'What?' 'Huh?' 'Shush now,' as it creaks, aches, groans, until the final ice block drops from the ceiling of the freezer like something vanquished.

Dream, and in your dreams babies with the personalities of dash hounds, as fat as Macy balloons, float by the treetops.

The first permanent polyurethane heart is surgically implanted.

'Significant Objects in my Grandmother's Life', is a series of discontinuous vignettes, which are moments or scenes in the narrator's grandmother's life. It does not follow the diary format of Moore's story, but through the vignettes the pivotal story of what happened to her first child is revealed.

In the most recent stories I have written there is a return to classic, 'end-heavy' stories. In 'The Bunker' and 'Their Last Holiday' the story structures move towards violent endings. These endings are not epiphanies, but scenes of carnage. In most of my stories, the central character is a victim, rather than a perpetrator. To bring issues of complicity close to home, I used 'alternative reality' and horror scenarios. This meant writing a different kind of short story. 'The Bunker' focuses on external events and builds up to the ending. The story is end-heavy or to use Baldeshwiler's term, 'epical'. But the ending is not utterly closed, as

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<sup>68</sup> 'How to Talk to Your Mother (notes)', in *Self-Help*, Lorrie Moore (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp83-96.



the reader is left to infer that they are going to kill Yasmin. Even though this story is 'epical', 'the reader is interpolated into the fictional world' and the narration does not 'draw attention to its own textuality', I do not think it falls into Catherine Belsey's category of 'readable' texts.<sup>69</sup> Drawing the reader towards this scene of violence by the use of the 'end-heavy' structure and narrative drive disturbs the reader. Rather than using postmodern techniques to question reality, 'traditional' narrative technique seemed to work here.

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<sup>69</sup> Catherine Belsey, p.92.

### Section 3

#### Ethics, Voice and the 'White Writer'

Many of the characters in my stories are from different ethnic backgrounds. A number focus on characters who are refugees and asylum seekers, who, it could be argued are some of the most marginalised and 'voiceless' people in society. During the process of writing the collection, I had to ask myself as a white woman writer what authority I have to write about their experiences and use their voices and experiences in my writing. What am I trying to say about their lives? And why? Who am I to write about a Kurdish refugee? On a practical level I could say that some of these stories developed out of some of the campaign work I conducted with women asylum seekers in Manchester. I had a sense of wanting to write about these issues, but not wanting to 'use' their stories. So the stories in this collection are fictional, though drawn from research.

The debates surrounding appropriation and voice have grown out of both feminist critical work and post-colonial studies and continue in the criticism of ethnic minority writing. These debates focus around the questions of who speaks, who has the right to speak, from what position does someone speak and with what authority do they speak about these experiences? Is narrating from the point of view of a marginalised voice an act of appropriation and one imbued with power? Joseph Pivato, an Italian-Canadian academic, would argue that it is:

When a person from outside the minority group assumes to speak about the experience of, and for the people of the marginalized group it is not just a political problem but an aesthetic one as well. It cannot be explained away by appealing to the freedom of the imagination of the artist. When power is involved there is no real freedom of the imagination for the artist. Appropriation of voice, by definition is not a dialogue among equals, but an exercise of power by the appropriator over the minority object, who is thus made an object and not a subject<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Joseph Pivato, 'Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction?' Centre for Language and Literature, Athabasca University, <<http://www.athabascau.ca/cll/pivatoessays/repreEthnic.htm>>, [last accessed 09.01.2010].



In his article, Pivato situates himself in the debates surrounding the politics of classical realism and postmodernism and the question of an authentic voice, which I have just outlined. Anglo-American feminism privileged the woman author as having a duty to write about her experiences, which were both individual and representative and had a duty to communicate these authentic experiences to a readership. The emphasis was on representation and communication, which privileged realism and autobiography as forms for critics such as Rita Felski.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Elaine Showalter argues that to find out about women's experiences we have to read texts by women because in 'literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be.'<sup>72</sup> In this approach the text 'has disappeared, or become the transparent medium through which 'experience' can be seized.'<sup>73</sup> Similarly to post-structuralism, French feminism argued that the politics was in the form, in undermining the dominant masculine codes of writing. For French feminists such as Helene Cixous, the idea of an 'authentic voice' would be construed as naive and essentialist because all differences are socially constructed. For Cixous, *écriture féminine* is not linked to a woman's gender; it is a discursive practice that undermines the logocentrism of Western thought and can be written by either gender.<sup>74</sup>

However, the dismissal of authenticity and voice could be argued as an act of power, and often one that is made from a privileged position. But if the former argument is adhered to, then one can only speak about one's own experience; a writer has to have the right 'credentials' to tackle certain topics. Writing about the issues in my stories unavoidably involves power and appropriation, but I would argue that writing about them is also a political act. What matters is a self-awareness and self-reflexivity; an awareness of form and politics in writing and the context in which I am writing.

Moreover, this discussion is linked to form and how voice is articulated in a collection of stories. In collections, which I will discuss in greater detail in section 7, a story is not in

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<sup>71</sup> Rita Felski, 'Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change' in *Feminist Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwells, 1996), pp.165-168.

<sup>72</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'Towards A Feminist Poetics' in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp.22-41 (p.27). Quoted in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985),

<sup>73</sup> Toril Moi, p.76.

<sup>74</sup> See Toril Moi, p.108-110.



isolation. This is doubly so in a sequence of stories, in which the stories create a greater, though fragmented, whole. The heterogeneity of voice in a short story collection to some extent belies the authorial authority. There is no one fixed point of view in the collection. The reader is asked to sympathise and engage in a humanist way with a variety of points of view and rests on none. None is privileged. Situating characters from different backgrounds in the same arena of stories, I would argue, in collections such as Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*, lessens this act of appropriation.

The other element of short stories is that they do not claim to 'know' everything about a character. They do not picture a whole life, or attempt to explain everything about them. As John Wain has pointed out, a short story can give you 'just one flash of that person'. When he writes a short story he 'writes about things that are not within my (his) given experience, and obviously observed to some extent from the outside'.<sup>75</sup> In short stories the claim to knowledge is more partial. So while it may be seen as presumptuous at least or indeed an act of appropriation of voice, this notion of the ethics of writing delimits the possibilities of fiction and forgets why we read. Fiction is about others and empathising with another's viewpoint; it is not purely about the self; reading and writing open out to others and to the world. So the issue of appropriation of voice demands a creative engagement not a passive acceptance. This creative engagement creates an awareness of the issues and exposes potential complicity.

All writers use research in their writing, be it checking facts or dates, or researching lives other than their own. As Pivato argues, writers cannot simply appeal to the freedom of the artistic imagination. In her article 'Voice appropriation and Writing for Other Cultures', the writer Rukhsana Khan problematises the distinction between non-Muslims writing about Muslims as Islam is 'hardly a homogeneous entity'. For Khan, the issues are based on getting the facts right. Not just external facts but how people or characters think; ideologies. For example, she highlights a novel in which the author:

had transposed Western feminist ideas on a girl, who, through the scope of the novel, had no access to that way of thinking. In other words this author had gotten

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<sup>75</sup> John Wain, quoted in 'Time and the Short Story', Jean Pickering, *Re-Reading the Short Story* ed. Clare Hanson (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.51.



the nitty gritty details of the culture right, but she'd gotten their thought processes, their inner logic, all wrong... what this author had done was write a story with a Western-type heroine in a Pakistani setting. It was no wonder the book was so successful.'<sup>76</sup>

Rukhsana Khan argues that 'appropriation' is not just about the act of writing about another's culture but also about understanding cultural and ideological differences. What is at stake is not solely the gender or ethnic background of the author, but the meanings generated by the text within its circulation and readership. Nevertheless, as a white European, a writer cannot forget one's position of power in relation to what or who one writes about.

I will analyse how different writers have written about cultural difference, race and racism and how they have written from another culture's viewpoint. In so doing, I will try to show techniques of avoiding absolute appropriation and the limits of these techniques. In *The Blue*, Maggie Gee writes from a white perspective, using point of view and the distance between the narrator and the character to critique the characters' norms and racist values. Maggie Gee, Angela Carter and Nadine Gordimer use the omniscient third person to critique the racist values that this voice traditionally (in the 'classic realist text') embodied and portrayed. Other writers, such as Robert Olen Butler, write openly from another perspective in the first person. Butler uses the first person to invite the reader into the Vietnamese character's perspective. This is in some ways problematic. While Nadine Gordimer's novels are usually written from a white South African viewpoint in order to broach political issues, Gordimer's short stories self-reflexively employ multiple viewpoints. Like Gordimer, W.G. Sebald uses a self-reflexive mode in order to write about Jewish and other experiences of diaspora.

Maggie Gee's collection *The Blue* directly focuses on issues of race and racism. In the story 'The Artist', she questions the assumptions and attitudes of the character through irony. The main character is a woman who writes, and sees herself as a writer, though the narrator reveals in parenthesis, as an aside to the reader: (She wrote novels, which had

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<sup>76</sup> Ruksana Khan, 'Voice Appropriation and Writing for Other Cultures' <[Rukhsanakhan.com/article-voiceapp.htm](http://Rukhsanakhan.com/article-voiceapp.htm)> [last accessed 12/06/09].

never been published, but she had a study, and told people she wrote.)'<sup>77</sup> She fails to recognise that her builder is an artist in his home country and does not notice that his daughter dies the day he finishes painting her house. Through the story, point of view and the ironic distance between the narrator and the character, or more accurately, between who speaks and who sees in the story, reveals this to the reader, while the character remains oblivious. Her smugness and narrowness of vision, signalled by the fact she rarely leaves the house, or lifts her nose from the love stories she is writing, never cracks. But the joke is on her. She says to her husband:

“Boris is an artist. He isn’t of course. But he wants to be.” She enjoyed this thought. Poor Boris. What Emma did, he only dreamed of.<sup>78</sup>

In ‘The Artist’, the narrator is both within and outside the character’s point of view, enabling Maggie Gee to portray and simultaneously question the character’s smug assumptions through irony.

In the title story, Maggie Gee writes about a Libyan woman. The story was commissioned by the British Council on a trip to Libya and focuses on a woman who works as a dry cleaner. An unnamed third person narrator begins: ‘The woman had lived through the longest day, which was boiling hot, in the city, pressing and sieving her into tiny pieces.’<sup>79</sup> The character is also anonymous, but unlike in ‘The Artist’ the narrator does not use irony to comment on the character. Multiple instances of oppression are shown as she leaves work and goes to the river. Maggie Gee uses ‘magical realism’ to lift the woman outside her circumstances. A swarm of butterflies protect her from the world and enable her to go where she is not allowed and finally to pass her children and their demands so she can enter the sea. For a moment the woman is able to transcend her circumstances and escape the confines around her, but the magical nature of her transcendence serves to highlight her everyday confines. However, the narrator does not attempt to ‘voice’ the Libyan character, to know her inner thoughts, and the figurative, dense language keeps the reader at a distance from the character.

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<sup>77</sup> Maggie Gee, ‘The Artist’, in *The Blue* (London: Telegram, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> Maggie Gee, p.17.

<sup>79</sup> Maggie Gee, p.9.



In 'Black Venus', Angela Carter writes Baudelaire's black mistress into history, giving a voice to the voiceless. To do this she uses her characteristic intrusive, omniscient narrative voice, which interjects the narrative with a 'we' and an 'I'. Her burlesque, metaphorically driven language and overtly twentieth-century viewpoint, questions and interrogates Jeanne's situation and relationship with Baudelaire through a clash of registers and styles. Angela Carter's parody of 'the classic realist's text's' omniscient narrative voice is used to subvert the masculinist nineteenth-century constructions of black women as exoticized and eroticized other, who is forced to dance naked for him, while simultaneously celebrating her sensuality and showing her as being more than how he sees her. Jeanne's thoughts and views belie how Baudelaire romanticises her and her home country. For example, he muses, 'Baby, baby, let me take you back to where you belong, back to your lovely lazy island where the jewelled parrot rocks on the enamel tree...' Using free indirect speech, we get Jeanne's thoughts:

Go, where? Not *there*! The glaring, yellow shore and harsh blue sky daubed in crude, unblended colours squeezed directly from the tube, where the perspectives are as abrupt as a child's drawings, your eyes hurt to look...

Her response reframes Baudelaire's romantic picture of them living 'among the palm-trees, under the purple flowers' through the discourse of art. The 'reality' is not the picture he imagines, but her 'picture' of it.<sup>80</sup> This story gives voice to Jeanne, but avoids appropriation through its positioning of the omniscient narrator in the story, and its focalisation through Jeanne, which enables her to become a subject. The story's self-reflexivity avoids voice appropriation and instead 'gives voice', but at the same time positions the narrator as twentieth-century.

In Nadine Gordimer's story 'Before the Gun Went Off', the omniscient narrative voice is used to set up the white supremacist views of the white South Africans and interrogate them:

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<sup>80</sup> Angela Carter, 'Black Venus', in *Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp.231-244 (p.231-232).

He knows that the story of the Afrikaner farmer – regional Party leader and Commandment of the local security commando – shooting a black man who worked for him will fit exactly *their* version of South Africa, it's made for them.<sup>81</sup>

The events in the story and revelation at the end that the man the farmer shot was his own son belie the certainty and indignation of the narrative voice (focalised mostly, but not wholly through the consciousness of the farmer). The dead man's mother is described as being 'a woman who can't be more than in her late thirties (they start bearing children at puberty).' The derisive comment in parenthesis is shown up when it is revealed that he is the farmer's son. The third person is used to critique racist views, either by using the distance between the character and the narrator to comment ironically on the character's views or the omniscient voice to question and subvert racism.

The first person is often used to engage the reader directly with the character's voice. In his collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, Robert Olen Butler uses the first person to portray immigrant Vietnamese living in Louisiana. The collection won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1993. Various reviews of the collection reveal the ethics and presumptions in this project. The Pulitzer Committee situated the stories within the literature of the Vietnam conflict and said they raised the literature 'to an original and highly personal new level'.<sup>82</sup> They praised the collection for giving another perspective on the Vietnam conflict and the literature that arose from it, which primarily focuses on American soldiers' experiences in Vietnam. By attempting to see the world through another's eyes engages the reader in this perspective. Writing is not just appropriation, but also an act of empathy. If we can never identify with another's perspective how are we supposed to overcome issues of racism or cultural difference?

However, the question is how is this done and what views are given and depends on the cultural reception of the work. *The New York Times* praised the collection for 'how

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<sup>81</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'Before the Gun Went Off', in *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1991) p. 111.

<sup>82</sup> 'Winners of the 1993 Pulitzer Prizes for Journalism, Literature, and the Arts', *New York Times*, April 14, 1993.



beautifully it achieves its daring project of making the Vietnamese real'.<sup>83</sup> It might be daring to try to write from a Vietnamese person's perspective, but to try to make them 'real' highlights the issue of how they aren't 'real' to American eyes. Likewise, the presumptions in the reviews reveal cultural presumptions at work in America. Philip Caputo, quoted on the back cover, likens his writing to Amy Tan's depiction of Chinese Americans, but claims 'Butler's is the greatest artistic achievement because he had to exercise far more imagination to enter the minds and hearts of his subjects', which conversely results in privileging the white male writer over the writer from an ethnic minority background.

Blanket statements that all depictions of other's voices are wrong deny the power of literature and how fiction works as texts, i.e. their narrative methods, as well as their function within a wider cultural arena. How do the images portrayed (even if written by a white male) work within cultural stereotypes and ideologies? However, it could be argued that Butler's collection lacks self-reflexivity and a textual contextualisation of his white Western male authorial voice. A closer look at one of the stories 'Mr Green' might elucidate this. The first person narrator is a Vietnamese woman living in Louisiana. 'I am a Catholic, the daughter of a Catholic mother and father, and I do not believe in the worship of my ancestors, especially in the form of a parrot'.<sup>84</sup> The voice is rational, forceful. It asserts its cultural and religious specificity. 'Especially in the form of a parrot' is the hook in the sentence, which turns the biographical information into a story. It could also hint at a story that denigrates the Vietnamese in its use of humour. But I would argue that the story does not do this. There is humour in the story, but it revolves around the narrator's grandfather's parrot and is tinged with pathos. The parrot becomes a symbol for her ambivalent relationship with her grandfather.

The narrator remembers when she lived in Vietnam as a child and her grandfather showed her how he worshipped the ancestors and the necessity of doing this, even though, and especially because, the rest of the family were Catholics. When her grandfather tells her

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<sup>83</sup> Packer, George (June 7, 1992), "From the Mekong to the Bayous", *New York Times*, <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CEFDB1030F934A35755C0A964958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>> [last accessed 23.11.09]

<sup>84</sup> Robert Olen Butler, 'Mr Green', in *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain* (London: Minerva, 1993), p. 17.



that is it not possible for her to oversee the worship of her ancestors alone because she is a girl, she the narrator states 'I felt a strange thing inside me, a recoiling, like I'd stepped barefoot on a slug, but how can you recoil from your own body?'<sup>85</sup> This description is in some ways roughly handled and seems pointed. But the issues around this are more deftly handled in other parts of the story. After her grandfather has died she brings the parrot to the States and looks after it. It seems as if she is caring for her grandfather's soul, though she claims this is impossible (according to Buddhism, a soul cannot transmigrate into a living creature). At the end of the story, the parrot's health declines and it plucks out all its feathers. The parrot reacts to her as her grandfather also reacted to women and their 'incessant chattering'. As a child she had wanted to be like her mother and had learnt to wring the necks of sparrows. She takes the parrot outside, and pins the parrot down. Here, she recalls her skills: 'But a Vietnamese woman is experienced in these things and Mr Green did not have a chance even to make a sound as I laid him on his side, pinned him with a knee, slid my hands up and wrung his neck.' The final sentence of the story again questions women's inferior status in religious practice. She wonders whether she will turn into an old woman who goes to mass every day, but reflects that, 'There were woman around Jesus when He died, the two Marys. They couldn't do anything for Him. But neither could the men, who had all run away.'<sup>86</sup>

Though the story could be said to 'appropriate' the voice of a Vietnamese woman in his use of the first person, the layering in the story of different discourses on religion and gender questions women's position in traditional Vietnamese culture. Like Ruksana Khan, would a Vietnamese claim that Western feminism has been placed in a Vietnamese character? Also, nowhere in the collection does the author question his position, his knowledge or how he accesses the worlds of the Vietnamese characters.

As a white South African, Nadine Gordimer is acutely aware of her position as a white writer and the ethics and issues of speaking for others. In the rare cases where she uses the first person to convey a black's character's voice, the story questions the reader's 'white' presumptions and knowledge of Africa. Many of the characters and narrators in Gordimer's novels are white South Africans. Until she wrote *My Son's Story* she believed

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Olen Butler, p.19.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Olen Butler, p.28.



that, 'the white writer must refuse to speak for blacks, must learn to 'listen'.<sup>87</sup> But she later argued that 'in a deeply divided country, whites and blacks could write about each other in certain circumstances.' In the novel *My Son's Story*, she uses the emotional entanglements of a family to 'imagine her way into a world she can only have experienced tangentially.'<sup>88</sup> This is part of the 'professional responsibility' for the 'transformation of society' that Gordimer sees as the fundament of commitment for a South African Writer'.<sup>89</sup>

In *Jump and Other Stories*, Gordimer incorporates different viewpoints and self-reflexively signals her position as a white writer. For example, as Jeanne Colleran argues, the story 'A Journey' 'signals its own impartiality',<sup>90</sup> by beginning the story from the point of view of a woman on a plane who resembles Gordimer herself. The multiple viewpoints in the collection work as a collage of voices, none outweighing the others; they are collected together as unique singularities. For Jeanne Colleran:

The voice of the white bourgeoisies does not fill the space of this collection in the same way that it reverberates throughout Gordimer's novels, and while the clearings opened for voices are necessarily narrow ones, then concision actually authenticates these voices, making them at once more credible and less usurped.<sup>91</sup>

In Nadine Gordimer's story 'The Ultimate Safari', a ten year old girl with her brothers and grandparents flee civil war in Mozambique by cutting through a safari park. This story is the young girl's first person narrative. This narrative voice works to question and disrupt the certainty of the white reader's position in relation to Africa. Firstly, this is done by the advert placed under the title of the story 'The Ultimate Safari':

*The African Adventure lives On ... You can do it!*

*The ultimate safari or expedition*

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<sup>87</sup> Susan M Greenstein, 'My Son's Story: Drenching the Censors – the Dilemma of White Writing', *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed by Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 193.

<sup>88</sup> Susan M. Greenstein, 'My Son's Story: Drenching the Censors – The Dilemma of White Writing', *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 191-212 (p.195-6).

<sup>89</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, p, 297 quoted in 'Archive of Apartheid: Nadine Gordimer's Short Fiction at the End of the Interregnum', in Bruce King, p. 238.

<sup>90</sup> Jeanne Colleran, 'Archive of Apartheid: Nadine Gordimer's Short Fiction at the end of the Interregnum', *The Later fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. by Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.237-245, (p.239).

<sup>91</sup> Jeanne Colleran, p.240.

*with leaders who know Africa.*

-Travel Advertisement,

Observer, London, 27/11/88<sup>92</sup>

The story though, does not seem to be about a safari. It begins with a retrospective first person narration. The age of the 'speaking voice' is not given; it is told retrospectively but conveys the disorientation of the child:

That night our mother went to the shop and she didn't come back. Ever. What happened? I don't know. My father also had gone away one day and never came back; but he was fighting in the war. We were in the war, too, but we were children, we were like our grandmother and grandfather, we didn't have guns.<sup>93</sup>

The reader's perspective is questioned through Gordimer's use of irony. The 'ultimate safari' is the flight of the children and their grandparents from the 'bandits' and starvation by travelling through the Safari park to refugee camps on the other side. 'We wanted to go where there were no bandits and no food. We were glad to think there must be such a place; away.'<sup>94</sup> They see 'the fires where the white people were cooking in the camps and we could smell the smoke and the meat,'<sup>95</sup> who are on safari (perhaps respondents to the advert).

The viewpoint of Africa that white readers might 'see' is reflected back at the reader by this use of narrative voice. By showing the other perspective, through the eyes of this girl, the reader's position is questioned and placed in doubt. The story is addressed to someone outside of her culture. The white reader's knowledge of Africa is again ironically placed in doubt at the end of the story. It is the journalist who calls their country 'Mozambique', but this is preceded by the grandmother's knowledge that the refugees are allowed to stay in this new place because they are all the same 'people'. She tells her granddaughter: 'Long ago, in the time of your father's, there was no fence that kills you, there was no Kruger

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<sup>92</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Ultimate Safari', in *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.31.

<sup>93</sup> Nadine Gordimer, p. 33.

<sup>94</sup> Nadine Gordimer, p. 35.

<sup>95</sup> Nadine Gordimer, p.38.



Park between them and us, we were the same people under our own king.’<sup>96</sup> Home in this story is equivocal. It has been divided by colonial rule. It is something remembered.

Throughout the story the grandmother has been a silent, strong, practical woman. At the end of the story, she is given voice by the interviewer:

And what do you hope for the future?

Nothing. I am here.

But for your children?

I want them to learn so that they can get good jobs and money.

Do you hope to go back to Mozambique – to your own country?

I will not go back... there is nothing. No home.

But the granddaughter hopes to go home, where she will find her mother and grandfather. ‘They’ll be home, and I’ll remember them.’<sup>97</sup>

In the above stories, the omniscient voice and the distance between the narrator and the character-focaliser is used to interrogate and question racist attitudes. In the portrayal of characters from different ethnic backgrounds by white writers, voice appropriation is lessened by the positioning of the narrator/author in the narrative. For me this is a kind of self-reflexivity, which positions the writer in relation to the subject of the narrative, and conveys the partial knowledge of the author and breaks the illusion of unmediated access to the character and her world.

### **Ethics and Voice in *When I Get Home***

In the following section I will attempt to analyse how my use of narrative technique has been affected by an awareness of these issues. My earlier story ‘The Breakfast She Had’ directly engages with the life of an asylum seeker.<sup>98</sup> It is narrated from Nadia’s point of view in the third person. Within the set of stories, it was the least one engaged with

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<sup>96</sup> Gordimer, p. 44.

<sup>97</sup> Gordimer, p.46.

<sup>98</sup> Zoe Lambert, ‘The Breakfast She Had’, in *Ellipsis 2* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2006), pp.77-84.

experimentation of voice. The first story, 'A Quiet Longing', used the first and second person to express the narrator's attempt to understand her mother's experience and simultaneously show how this is impossible. The use of the second person positions the reader in the mother's position, but narrating the story from the first makes this identification unstable. The fourth story, 'This is only a story about a woman on a bus', used the second and third person to question how we 'other' people. The 'you' is both the character on the bus, a genderless commuter and the 'you' of the reader. Here, though, I tried to use the 'power' of the story to pull the reader into the experience of the Lithuanian woman.

When writing 'The Breakfast She Had', I was conscious of 'appropriating' the experiences of the women who were asylum seekers who I had met. I made sure that the story was not biographical. I used research and detail I had gleaned from their experiences but made sure that it did not 'tell' their stories. It is a piece of fiction. The use of the third person and straight narration encourages the reader to identify and sympathise with the character. It places her centre stage. But on its own it does not engage with any questions of my authorial voice in relation to the experiences of a woman from Sudan. What is interesting about the story 'The Breakfast She Had', with its straight use of the third person, and traditional use of narration, is that it was the most widely read and published story in the sequence. It was published in *The Independent* and then used on three courses at three different universities. It was chosen over the other stories and praised for its use of detail and its use of the third person. The third person narrator focalised through a character, with minimal narratorial comment or intrusion. Through these techniques it gave the illusion of unmediated access to the character's world, which is perhaps why it was so popular.

In recent stories I have tried to deal with these issues in different ways, and avoid a presumption of unmediated access to a character's voice or world. In 'The War Tour' I attempted to address the issues of war tourism and voyeurism when writing about war when you are not a direct participant. In drafting the story I changed the mode of narration. In the first draft, the narrator was the Bosnian woman who was setting up an exhibition about the war. I had wanted the story to be about memorialising war, and the personal and national narratives we make about it. But this was too much of an artificial



device. The use of the photo of the goat rang false. She finds the photo while setting up the exhibition and it spurs memories of the siege. In redrafting the story I thought about the implications of my own position as a writer writing about war.

Part of this story's genesis was in a trip I made last summer to Bosnia. In redrafting the story I decided to rewrite the frame story. I changed it to someone visiting the country on holiday and meeting a woman on the train, who tells the narrator her story. The narrator of the story is writing a collection of stories. I reworked the story in this manner in order to question my own position in relation to the stories I am telling, other voices and the subject matter of war. My model for this story was W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* in which Sebald's first person narrator tells the story of the Austerlitz, who he met in a train station.<sup>99</sup> Fitting this format into a short story posed some problems. Within the larger framework of a novel, framing the story with a conversation series of meetings and conversations worked because of the longer flow of the narrative. Within the compressed space of a short story, this was difficult to pull off without it seeming forced or an obvious device. I wanted to include another narrator rather than 'claiming' the voice of the character Aida or giving the illusion of unmediated access to her story.

The second draft of the story attempts to deal with tourism and how war becomes just another holiday attraction. In this draft the Bosnian woman's story is told to the narrator, who tells it to the reader in a mix of reported speech and direct quotation. After initial drafts, feedback suggested that her voice did not sound 'Bosnian enough' – though she lived in Canada for many years. This complex depiction of voice had its problems. How much should I show in direct speech and how to suggest dialect and accent without stereotyping a character's use of English? I decided to not use the third person to narrate Aida's story instead of dramatising her speech and conversation with the narrator. But instead of writing a continuous narrative, I divided it into fragmentary paragraphs that are separated. There is no 'whole' story to her experiences, but instead just glimpses of what she has told the narrator.

In 'What He Won't Tell Her', the story is narrated in the third person and focalised through two characters in alternating sections. This story was commissioned to be read in

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<sup>99</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (London: Penguin, 2002).

forty libraries in Cheshire on World Book Day. They requested a story which 'thought about the relationship between Cheshire and the developing world' because Cheshire libraries send books to Sub-Saharan Africa and to Palestinian territories. They wanted a story that raised awareness. I wanted to address how and why we were participating in this event so I made one of the characters a woman attending a reading on World Book Day. But her phone goes off during the reading, so she rushes out and misses the story. Outside, she meets a man, who is arrested and taken away in a van. In using the woman's point of view I wanted to portray the reader/listener's sense of helplessness and apathy. She is momentarily concerned for him and follows the van in the car, but eventually is pulled back into her own world by family demands. In the other sections the narration is from the man's point of view. Similarly to 'The Breakfast She Had' this story offers the reader (or listener) unmediated access to Japhet's world, which the other character does not have. However, by situating the story at a reading for World Book Day, I tried to destabilise this idea of unmediated access. Doing this was not a gimmick, but placed the listener/reader in the woman's shoes, since they were at a reading.

'A Biography of Mrs Charlotte Manning' was also written with a reading in mind and plays with the idea of the writer/narrator. In this story I avoided trying to write from the view of the Aboriginal woman and kept within the viewpoint of Charlotte Manning through her diaries and letters. The narrator developed from trying to write an intrusive, omniscient narrator similar to Angela Carter's in 'Black Venus'. As I discussed earlier, Carter uses an authoritative omniscient narrator, who comments, intrudes and summarises; it is a parody of or the epitome of the nineteenth-century narrator. I wanted to experiment with this kind of narrative voice. On the whole, my use of the third person had been closely focalised through a central narrator and the difference between the narrator and the character had been minimalised through the use of free indirect speech. To write about a nineteenth-century character, I tried her approach. However, this did not work. I tried to write in this Carteresque third person narrative voice, but I could not make it my own. It felt false and pompous. This kind of authoritative voice seemed more natural in the first person, so it developed into the voice of a biographer.

The introduction of readings is when the author introduces her work, says where it came from and gives any necessary background information. In essence, the author speaks the



‘truth’ about the work. In my story the ‘introduction’ of the story is in fact the beginning of the story, which pretended to not be a story at all but ‘notes towards a biography’:

While compiling my collection of short stories I became sidetracked by a bibliography of 19<sup>th</sup> Century women’s travel narratives, which mentions the little known botanist and artist, Charlotte Manning, whose drawings and notes on Tasmanian wildlife were published posthumously in 1840 by Sparrow Press.

The story made up of excerpts of letters and diaries, knitted together by the narrator, who tries to make sense of them. The Aboriginal woman does not have a voice in the story because this story focused on Charlotte’s position and complicity in the situation. While other writers have used the omniscient narrators to interrogate racism through irony, I used the first person and the device of diaries and letters. By having the two voices in the story: the narrator’s and Charlotte’s, the reader could be both within and outside Charlotte’s perspective, and showed Charlotte as being both a victim and complicit in the situation.

## Section 4: The Home Front: The Depiction of Home and War in Short Fiction

### The Home and Women's Writing

In 1929, Virginia Woolf observed that:

This is an important book, the critics assume because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop.<sup>100</sup>

'The Critics' still seem to concur with which kinds of books are 'important' or significant. Over the past few years similar judgements have circulated in the media. For example, in Ali Smith and Toby Litt's introduction to *New Writing 13*, they claimed that:

The submissions from women were disappointingly domestic, the opposite of risk-taking – as if they had taken a special drug that keeps them dulled, good, saying the right thing, aping the right shape, and melancholy at doing it, depressed as hell.<sup>101</sup>

A similar view was taken by Muriel Grey, the 2007 Orange Prize judge. She complained about the volume of novels submitted that were about 'small-scale domestic themes such as motherhood, boyfriend troubles and tiny family dramas'. Women should free themselves from the constraints of the domestic, she advised, in order to be 'equal to their male rivals'. What was surprising about Grey's diatribe in her Guardian blog was that the Orange Prize prides itself on celebrating and promoting women's writing, but there have been similar complaints from its previous judges. In its inaugural year 1996, the judges Val Hennessey and Susan Hill claimed that British women's writing was parochial and dreary. For Hill, so many books were about 'domestic obsessions, marriages... and boring lives'.

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<sup>100</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 67

<sup>101</sup> *New Writing 13*, ed. by Toby Litt and Ali Smith, (London: Picador, 2005), p. x.



In 1999, British women's writing (in contrast with American) was described as 'insular', 'parochial', with 'no sense of the bigger picture' by the Chair of Judges, Lola Young.<sup>102</sup>

These were, of course, media generated debates, which spurred days of editorials and commissioned responses from women writers and editors, who on the whole defended the domestic.<sup>103</sup> But within the pages of furores and ripostes, questions about cultural value, women's writing and the domestic, circulated. In the judges' and editors' comments there seemed to be a pigeon holing, and perhaps inadvertent, dismissal of women's writing. The domestic is somehow only seen as particular to women, while men's 'experiences' and writing are supposedly universal. These debates showed how the domestic is still a pejorative term in relation to women's writing.

For Muriel Grey, it is the domestic as a subject matter, which continues to constrain women:

No one can expect women writers to suddenly buck the trends that have moulded them for decades. But we can keep the question of what constrains us in fiction writing as a living debate.<sup>104</sup>

For Grey, it is as if feminism has never happened and women writers are still padlocked to the stove. However, while she claims to be encouraging women writers to 'think big', the comment dismisses women's experience and the domestic. For Muriel Grey, the subject matter of mothering, children, housework and relationships constrains women, and writing about these topics is assumed to be autobiographical; women writers 'had forgotten the fundamental imperative of fiction writing. It's called making stuff up.'<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> See Emma Parker, 'Introduction "The Proper Stuff of Fiction": Defending the domestic, Reappraising the Parochial' in *Contemporary British Women Novelists*, ed. by Emma Parker (Cambridge: The English Association, 2004), pp.1-15.

<sup>103</sup> See A.L.Kennedy, 'Belittled Women' <[www.books.guardian/articles/](http://www.books.guardian/articles/)> [last accessed 4.1.2009].

<sup>104</sup> Muriel Grey, 'Women Authors Must Drop Domestic Themes', Guardian Booksblog <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2007/mar/21/womenauthorsmustdropdomest>> [last accessed 4.11 2009].

<sup>105</sup> Muriel Grey, 'Women Authors Must Drop Domestic Themes', <[blogs.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/03/women\\_authors\\_must\\_drop\\_domestic.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/03/women_authors_must_drop_domestic.html)> [last accessed 29/08/2007]

In their reply to the furore generated from their introduction, Litt and Smith defended their comments on the basis that they were not criticising the domestic itself, but the 'safe' writing of the submissions.<sup>106</sup> What this makes clear is that 'domestic' is associated with writing which is unadventurous, does not take risks, is pedestrian, and lacking imagination. It is dull, not only in content, but also in how it is written. It is associated with a dull, domestic realism.

The issue at the centre of these debates is precisely what Woolf was questioning. This is the lack of cultural value associated with the literary representation of women's experiences and the home, which stems from both a denigration of women's experiences and their treatment in fiction. As Virginia Woolf argues in *A Room Of One's Own*, these views go back a long way. George Eliot's partner, G.H. Lewes can give us example. In 1852, he surveyed 'the lady novelists' and surmised that 'the domestic experience which forms the bulk of women's knowledge finds an appropriate form in novels'.<sup>107</sup> In the nineteenth century, women's largely 'domestic' experience was seen as 'appropriate' to what was then a popular and 'low' cultural form - the novels written by women anyway.<sup>108</sup> It was akin to saying the novel was like soap opera, kitchen sink drama, chick lit. But now that the novel can be both a popular and supposedly 'high' cultural form, domestic experience is not viewed as important or interesting enough for serious literary fiction. To compete with male writers, the judges imply, they have to write like men, and show some 'muscle'. But the depiction of the domestic in men's writing is never questioned. Similarly, Emma Parker highlights the continuing cultural assessment of women's writing that concerns the domestic as being devoid of depth. I agree with Parker when she says that 'glib generalisations' and 'misconceptions' about 'domestic' fiction are still pervasive today.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ali Smith and Toby Litt, 'Brought To Book', Guardian Unlimited letters [accessed 2.10.2007 – since then this URL has disappeared].

<sup>107</sup> G.H. Lewes, 'The Lady Novelists', *Westminster Review*, II (1852), pp.29-40.

<sup>108</sup> See Barbara Caine, 'G.H. Lewes and The Lady Novelists' *Sydney Studies in English*, 7 (1981), 86-101, <<http://escholarship.usyd.edu.au/journals/index.php/SSE/article/viewFile/378/349>> [last accessed 10.01.2010].

<sup>109</sup> Emma Parker, 'The Proper Stuff of Fiction: Defending the Domestic, Reappraising the Parochial' in *Contemporary British Women Writers*, ed. by Emma Parker, (Cambridge: The English Association, 2005), p.6.



Notions of the domestic are already implicit in the term 'realism'. This is evident in Raymond Williams' definition of 'realism' in *Realism and the Contemporary Novel*. 'Realism' is a) a technical skill in rendering the world with precision and b) a subject matter that suggests the *everyday* and the *mundane*.<sup>110</sup> The OED defines the 'everyday' as 'happening or used everyday' and 'mundane' as 'lacking interest or excitement, dull'.<sup>111</sup> Connotations of 'the domestic' are also caught up in 'the everyday' and 'mundane', which we could see in the quote from *New Writing 13*, as the women's submissions were 'dull' and 'domestic'. If literary notions of 'realism' connote domesticity, mundaneness and dullness, this only happens in relation to literature by women. The OED defines 'realism' in relation to art and literature as being 'a deliberate rejection of conventionally beautiful or appropriate subjects in favour of *sincerity and a focus on simple and unidealized treatment of contemporary life*'. Specifically this term is applied to a late nineteenth-century movement in French painting and literature represented by Gustave Courbet in the former and Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert in the latter'<sup>112</sup> (italics mine). In this definition of realism, Flaubert and Balzac are not mundane, dull or domestic. They escape this critique, as their work is seen as 'sincere' and placed in the history of literature because it focuses on 'contemporary life' and does not adhere to the previous conventions of idealized treatment of 'appropriate subjects'. In relation to women's writing, there seems to be a conflation of both parts of Raymond's definition of realism; a form that renders 'the world with precision' is conflated with a subject matter that suggests the 'everyday', the 'mundane': the domestic space.

Since the nineteenth century the domestic has become pejoratively associated with women's writing. But in British fiction, the domestic is principally middle-class. Many critics have noted the importance of the domestic space in relation to the rise of the (middle class) female novelist in the nineteenth century. Mary Eagleton states that 'what happens in the family, in the neighbouring Big House, in the next street or town, has been the staple diet of the novel, and it is the very world that women know so well'. Knowledge of this

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<sup>110</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel' in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge, (London: Longman, 1972), p. 581-2.

<sup>111</sup> *New Oxford Dictionary of English*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*



world has been evidenced as 'confirmation of women's 'natural' character',<sup>113</sup> as can be seen in Lewes' quote above. Nancy Armstrong and Juliet Mitchell have questioned the biologism of these assumptions and argued that the rise of the woman novelist was linked to 'the development of the novel, the consolidation of bourgeois capitalism, and a creation of a new understanding of the term 'woman''. Nancy Armstrong goes further; she recasts the historical development of the British novel in relation to the domestic, arguing that although previous literary criticism had held up the male *Bildungsroman* as the 'best example' of the novel, the 'domestic novel' has 'enjoyed a steady publication history for almost three hundred years'. She claims that the novel descended from the 'conduct book' and prescribed a 'distinctively modern brand of femininity' that she calls 'the domestic woman'.<sup>114</sup> She argues that 'the domestic woman' was the first modern individual. This individual is bourgeois and middle class, which can be seen in Woolf's description of 'the feelings of a woman in a drawing room' – she does not mention the feelings of a woman in the kitchen or scullery.

Woolf's comparison notes the cultural value given not only to men's writing, but also to male experience, which stems from a 'devaluation of women'.<sup>115</sup> For Virginia Woolf, the question of the value of women's experiences and the domestic is caught up in the history of the novel and the woman writer. In *A Room of One's Own* she thinks about what women had written and what women *had not* written. This question has been taken up in works such as Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* and Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* and Mary Eagleton's *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* to Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik's *Landscapes of Desire*, Chiara Brigganti's *Domestic Modernism, the interwar novel and E.H. Young* and *Contemporary British Women Writers* ed. by Emma Parker. These feminist critics have taken issue with misconceptions about the domestic and women's writing in different ways and on different historical moments.

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<sup>113</sup> Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. Mary Eagleton (London: Blackwells, 1996), p. 138.

<sup>114</sup> Nancy Armstrong, 'What Feminism did to Novel Studies' in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. by Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 99-118, (p. 104).

<sup>115</sup> Emma Parker, 'Introduction "The Proper Stuff of Fiction": Defending the domestic, Reappraising the Parochial' in *Contemporary British Women Novelists*, ed. by Emma Parker (Cambridge: The English Association, 2004), pp.1-15, (p. 1).



Recent critics such as Judy Giles and Chiara Brigganti have looked into how the domestic shapes women's identity and writing. Brigganti argues that the domestic plays an important role in modernist writing by women. She questions the modernist/realist divide within an analysis of the representation of domestic spaces by writers such as E.H. Young. She counters the assumption that because the domestic suggests the ordinary and verisimilitude, the 'domestic novel' could only be read as 'realist' in technique and as defending the status quo or as politically 'conservative' by analysing the muted experimental narrative techniques and the interrogation of the domestic in E.H. Young's novels.

Essay collections like *Contemporary British Women Writers* and *Our House* have focused on how the domestic is represented. *Our House* discusses domestic space from a number of perspectives, highlighting that notions of the home impact on everybody's lives, confronting how the home's function is 'a site of peace and sanctuary, on the one hand, and of danger and incarceration, on the other'. The contradictory nature of domestic space is underpinned by the ambivalence underpinning the concept of dwelling, as a universal human space, as well as a site of contradiction in the discourse of gender. For Peter Childs in contemporary novels, the image of the house is a site 'in which female identity is always on the point of formation and yet also always on the point of dissolution'.<sup>116</sup> For Alice Entwistle, 'women's poetry testifies to the way in which domesticity constrains but also-paradoxically, by offering emotional security – both anchors and stimulates women's creative lives.'<sup>117</sup>

### The Home in *When I Get Home*

This collection developed alongside my PhD research into the home and women's writing and the short story. While I do not have space to enter into the above debates, I will draw out a few points that have affected my writing. Though some of the stories about childhood have some obvious concerns to do with the domestic, the stories about refugees and war

<sup>116</sup> *Our House*, ed. by Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft, (London: Rodolpi, 2006), p. 24.

<sup>117</sup> Alice Entwistle, 'Scotland's New House: Domesticity and Domicile in Contemporary Scottish Women's Poetry', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. by Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.114-123.

might at first glance seem removed from an analysis of the representation of domestic space. But I would argue that the home is shaping presence or absence in most of the stories. In the following sections, I will discuss the home, then the relationship between home and war and finally the home and childhood.

In contrasting the battlefield to the drawing room, Virginia Woolf is describing the division between the private and public spheres; the public and masculine world of the battlefield is far removed from the feelings of a woman in a drawing room. In *When I Get Home*, I have refused this division of private and public spheres; the home is the battlefield and the domestic is where public events take place. The home is the site of war in 'The War Tour' and the effects of a fascist state are played out in a garden in 'The Bunker'. The occupation of Norway during the Second World War is seen in the terms of 'the feelings of a woman' in 'Lebensborn'. In the stories about childhood and adolescence, I explore the power and family dynamics of the parental home in 'The New Girl', 'To Basra' and 'Lad Lazarus'. Home is both an absence and a dangerous place in '33 Bullets', and 'What He Won't Tell Her'. The home figures as a lost space, both actual, metaphorically and psychically. Before discussing home in relation to war and then childhood, I will discuss the representation of home in two stories: 'The Biography of Charlotte Manning' and 'Lebensborn'.

As many of the theorists and critics mentioned above have noted, domestic space holds an important and problematic place in women's writing. In Helen Simpson's 'Hey Yeah Right Get A Life', the identity of Dorrie is symbolised in the description of domestic space. The disintegration and change in her identity through motherhood is conveyed metaphorically through the rubble and mess in the home:

Since the arrival of the children, she had broken herself into little pieces like a biscuit and was now scattered all over the place. The urge – indeed, the necessity to give everything, to throw herself on the bonfire, had been shocking, but now it was starting to wear off.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Helen Simpson, 'Hey Yeah Right Get A Life', in *Hey Yeah Right Get A Life* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp.20-58 (p.21).



But it is when she opens the kitchen window and looks out into the garden in the early morning that she feels she feels whole and she thinks 'it can't all be spoken for'.<sup>119</sup> The story ends that evening, when in the kitchen, she realises that 'her ghost was out there in the garden, the ghost from her freestanding past'. Dorrie again unlocks the window and opens it. She realises that the pain she has been feeling was not 'killer pain', but the 'the feeling in a limb that has gone numb, when blood starts to flow again'.<sup>120</sup> This is a moment of renewal and revival.

Though Charlotte Manning is far removed from Dorrie, there are symbols of interior and exterior space. This patterning of space is indeed a recurrent symbol in women's writing. In Helen Simpson's story, the garden is where Dorrie can begin to feel whole again. This threshold space of the window becomes a space of renewal and rebirth. Charlotte finds release in the landscape outside of the home. Home is a space of confinement in 'The Biography of Charlotte Manning', in which both Charlotte and the Aboriginal woman are trapped. This new home, because it is far away from England, offers some opportunities for Charlotte to pursue her art. But it is in drawing the landscape that she discovers the outhouse and what it contains. When I was writing this story there was a conscious echo in my mind of the tale of Bluebeard, and the novels and stories that have rewritten the motif of a woman trapped in a room. In particular, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier and more recently in 'The Bloody Chamber' by Angela Carter, and 'Bluebeard's Egg' by Margaret Atwood.

For 'The Biography of Charlotte Manning' I researched into colonialism in Australia and Tasmania, principally the article, 'Patterns of Frontier Genocide 1803-1920: the Aboriginal Tasmanians, the Yuki of California and the Herero of Namibia'.<sup>121</sup> As I stated earlier, I had been told that many of my characters were victims and that I told and retold a similar story of victimhood, so in this story I tried to write from the perspective of someone who was complicit. The problem I faced was forcing twenty-first-century views on nineteenth-century characters. In the novel *English Passengers* this is avoided by the use of multiple

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<sup>119</sup> Helen Simpson, p.20.

<sup>120</sup> Helen Simpson, p.57-8.

<sup>121</sup> Benjamin Madley, 'Patterns of Frontier Genocide 1803-1920: the Aboriginal Tasmanians, the Yuki of California and the Herero of Namibia', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6:2 (2004), (167-192).



first person narrators, who all have very different views.<sup>122</sup> The nineteenth-century views in my story are drawn from quotations in Benjamin Madley's article. In particular, I drew on the idea that the early colonists saw the land as empty and ready for the taking because habitations had not been built on it. They did not believe the Aboriginal people owned the land because they did not use European methods of agriculture and habitation.<sup>123</sup> In my first draft, there was not enough detail about the landscape for this to come across. The draft I read out at the library was not entirely accurate according to my friend from Tasmania. She wanted more detail about Hobart, the port, as well as the land and flora. She sent me information she had and I included more details on the flowers and the land. I read *My Home in Tasmania During a Residence of Nine Years* by Mrs Charles Meredith<sup>124</sup> in order to edit my use of language.

In Alice Munro's story, 'Home' from her fictionalised memoir and family history *A View from Castle Rock*, the narrator is returning home: 'I come home as I have done several times in the past year, travelling on three buses.'<sup>125</sup> She now lives only a hundred miles from her home in Ontario, but for many years she lived a thousand miles away and rarely visited. 'I thought of it then as a place I might never see again and I was greatly moved by the memory of it. I would walk through its rooms in my mind.' But this has changed. Her father and step mother have upgraded and altered the house from 'a house where people have lived close to the bone for over a hundred years' to somewhere 'modern'. But she does not object to this in a way her father expects. She no longer feels the same way about the home as she once did. 'I tell him that I am not sure whether I love any place, and that it seems to me it was myself I loved here – some self I have finished with, and none too soon.'<sup>126</sup> During this visit, her father becomes ill and her visit is prolonged. She is relieved when she is able to return to her other life. In 'Home', Munro's sense of identity is related to the parental home; the changes and modifications made to the home represent her own changes and movement away from the childhood self who lived there. The Bachelard type nostalgia and longing she experienced when she lived far away is replaced by pragmatism

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<sup>122</sup> Matthew Kneale, *English Passengers* (London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>123</sup> Benjamin Madley, p.168.

<sup>124</sup> Mrs Charles Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania During a Residence of Nine Years* (London: John Murray 1852) <http://www.archive.org/stream/myhomeintasmani00meregoog> [last accessed 16/12/2009].

<sup>125</sup> Alice Munro, 'Home', in *The View From Castle Rock* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), pp.285-315 (p.315).

<sup>126</sup> Alice Munro, p.288-230.



and more certain sense of her present identity. She is glad that she is no longer that younger self.

In 'Lebensborn', there is a different kind of homecoming. Hanna has no home in her homeland, Norway. Oslo is alien to her and there is no longer a childhood home to visit. For Hanna, her home in Salford is a place of safety and seclusion, but her home becomes a metaphor of how she has shut out her traumatic past. During her flight to Salford after going to Oslo to her mother's funeral, she reads her mother's diary, and in doing so, understands her mother's experiences better and therefore comes to terms with something in herself. However, in the early drafts of the story I struggled to convey this internal change. Similarly to '33 Bullets' the internal change and epiphany of the modern lyric story did not work here. I did not want it to be sentimental and overstated. I wanted this internal change to be shown in the external description, but instead nothing came across; the early draft had another non ending, where it seemed as if I had just stopped writing. In 'Lebensborn', it seemed necessary to convey this change through external action, rather than description.

In Alice Munro's recent collection *Too Much Happiness*, the characters accommodate what has happened to them in surprising ways. In 'Dimensions' a woman is visiting her husband in a facility.<sup>127</sup> The story begins on her bus journey there and through a complex structure, reveals their destructive relationship which ended in him murdering their three children after an argument and she has gone to stay with a friend. On the bus ride to visit her husband in the facility, which is the frame of the story, she gains relief from her pain and grief when there is an accident on the road and she helps to save a boy's life. The story ends on her saying to the driver that she will stay with the boy, she is no longer going to the facility. Up until this point, Dorrie seemed to still be under her husband's influence. She has gained comfort from her husband's letters in which he tells her that he has seen their children in another 'dimension' and that they are well and happy.

The frame of 'Lebensborn' is also a journey, but Hanna is not comforted at first by her mother's diaries because they open up a history of pain. While the ending of 'Dimensions' is climactic, I did not want 'Lebensborn' to be so, as most of the story is very dramatic.

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<sup>127</sup> Alice Munro, 'Dimensions', in *Too Much Happiness* (London: Chatto and Windus), pp.1-31.



Instead, 'Lebensborn' ends on an odd note. Hanna looks out of her window and two lads are passing. It is Phil, from my story 'To Basra', who puts his finger up at her. In an earlier draft she withdrew from the window and back into her house. It became a signal of her continued withdrawal from the world. I rewrote the section as the end of the story (previously it was near the end) and in the rewrite she puts her finger up at him as he saunters away. Similarly to 'Hey Yeah Right Get a Life', 'Lebensborn' ends on the threshold, with Hanna looking out of the window. But this is not a moment of introspection and reflection. Instead, it is in a confrontation with the outside world that gives Hanna a sense of renewal. However, responses to this ending were varied. Some readers liked how the ending slotted in with 'To Basra'. Other feedback suggested that I rework the ending so that Hanna does not write down her experiences, but talks to her daughter. I attempted to change the ending in this way, but trying to do so felt forced, so I instinctively left it as it was.

In one of the most recently written stories, 'The Bunker', the home and the garden is where the effects of a fascist state are played out. The origins of this story go back a few years to a footnote in another story about a bunker the characters had in their garden. In the early draft of this story there is a bunker in the garden, which was built by the narrator's granddad. The story is about growing up with this bunker and waiting for a catastrophe to happen. But the catastrophe never came in the story and the story seemed to drift to an end. I left the story for a few months and when I returned to it I realised that a catastrophe should happen, but not one they expected. Similarly to a couple of the other stories, I decided on a drastic rewrite. The narrator changed from a child to an adult. Her grandfather built the bunker many years ago, and she has returned to live with him and her mother after a break up, but the catastrophe was not a war, but an alternative present in which a right wing coalition forms with the BNP and non-white people are expelled from Britain.

As I mentioned earlier, this story is more 'epical' than 'lyrical'. Adam Marek's story 'Testicular Cancer Versus the Behemoth' manages to combine both the lyric and epical forms.<sup>128</sup> In this story a Behemoth is let loose on the city while a man is diagnosed with testicular cancer. He goes to save his girlfriend and ends up confronting the Behemoth. The

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<sup>128</sup> Adam Marek, 'Testicular Cancer Versus The Behemoth', in *Instruction Manual for Swallowing* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2007), pp.45-58.



ending is both dramatic and epiphanic. In my story, the narrator is hiding a Pakistani friend and her baby in the bunker, but the narrator's mother and grandfather are not aware of this. The focus of the action is the garden, where the private and public meet. It is in this threshold space that the violence happens. In 'The Bunker', the garden is the battlefield on the threshold of the private and the public.

## Section 5

### The Home in War Fiction

In a recent meeting with the editor at Comma, Ra Page announced that I was writing 'a book about war'. 'No, I'm not,' I said. 'Why are you denying it?' He asked. 'I don't know,' I said. I floundered. I did not think of my stories as about being war. They were about other things. The Home. Adolescence. Refugees. But I could not deny that war and conflict was as a backdrop or element of a number of stories.

In this section of the commentary I will attempt to situate my stories in war literature and think about how I have portrayed war and its relationship to home in comparison with other short story writers. Though most of my focus is on short stories, I will also refer to novels. In British and American fiction, war happens away from home, while 'home' is set up as the symbol of what war is for; it is both something to protect and a symbol of femininity that has to be left behind in order to survive. War fiction is traditionally male territory. War writing often demands an authentic, male, veteran's voice. War is a male space, and the canon of war literature has occluded writing by women. In women's writing about war, there is a focus on the after effects, the trauma, the legacy, and the memory of war.

War fiction traditionally deals with the experiences of soldiers and battle. Tobey C. Herzog argues that war fiction suggests 'a fundamental universality among wars: emotions, combat experiences, battlefield rituals, and changes soldiers undergo.'<sup>129</sup> Often, the war fiction, and in particular war novels, focuses on 'a young soldier's loss of innocence and romantic illusions on the battlefield.'<sup>130</sup> Herzog draws on Fussell's work in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, and follows Fussell's division of the thematic and structural patterns of war fiction into four phases. The first stage is a romanticism of war and innocent, unrealistic notions of battle and glory, which are engendered by popular myths, literature and film. In the second stage these illusions are shattered by the experiences on the battlefield, and in the third there is a 'more open-ended period of contemplation'. In the final stage, soldiers continue to reflect on their experiences and struggle to adjust to

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<sup>129</sup> Tobey C. Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.  
<sup>130</sup> Herzog, p.4.



civilian life.<sup>131</sup> Some of these stages are present in novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Catch 22* as well as postmodern fictions *Slaughterhouse 5* and *The Things They Carried*.

In Ernest Hemingway's story, 'Soldier's Home', home no longer holds any meaning for Krebs. He returns from the First World War a few months after the 'greeting of the heroes is over'. Without this greeting, he does not feel as if he has actually come home. He is unable to talk about war, and no one is really interested. When he does, he finds himself lying about it and the lying makes him find the experience distasteful. The story is tinged with disillusionment, apathy and disappointment. Krebs cannot find any authentic way of speaking about the war or of representing it.

The story is narrated in the third person and summarises Krebs' experiences through free indirect speech until the more fully dramatised final scene where his mother confronts him about his future. The power of the story lies in its sparse use of language and repetition. Repetition, reversal and irony are used to convey a sense of disillusionment and inauthenticity:

There is a picture which shows him on the Rhine with two German girls. Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms. The German girls are not beautiful. The Rhine does not show in the picture.<sup>132</sup>

The romanticised image of soldiers at war is set up and taken apart through the ironic reversal of the details in the photo. Throughout the story, repetition and cadence are used to convey Krebs' alienation from his home town. The narrator states, 'On the whole he had liked Germany better. He did not want to leave Germany. He did not want to come home. Still, he had come home.'<sup>133</sup>

As in the stages outlined above, this story is about trying to return to civilian life. Though he is seen as a 'man' now and allowed to drive the family car he is unable to fulfil his family's expectations of making a way for himself and settling down. Krebs is left feeling

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<sup>131</sup> Herzog, p.14.

<sup>132</sup> Hemingway, 'Soldier's Home', in *The Essential Hemingway* (London: Penguin, 1947), p.311.

<sup>133</sup> Hemingway, p. 314.

lethargic and alienated. In the final scene his mother becomes the locus of his sense of alienation and ambivalence about home. He feels 'sick and vaguely nauseated' when she tells him she held him as a baby next to her heart. In this encounter he has to lie because 'he couldn't tell her, he couldn't make her see it',<sup>134</sup> but he does not want to hurt her by saying he no longer loves her. Even though he has plans at the end of the story, the tone of the narration leaves a sense of hopelessness: 'He would go to Kansas and get a job and she (his mother) would feel alright about it.'<sup>135</sup> There is no 'Soldier's Home' in the story.

In Tim O'Brien's 'The Things they Carried', war is depicted as a 'masculine' realm far from the 'feminine' home. The narrator describes what the soldiers are carrying as they march through Vietnam. The narrator focuses on the Lieutenant and the letters he carries from a girl from home. The description of what the soldiers carry effectively characterises the soldiers. Similarly to 'Soldier's Home', this story uses repetition in the details of what the soldiers carried as well as structurally returning to the death of Lavender, finally revealing the effect this has had on Lieutenant Jimmy Cross.

An image of 'home' is contained in the letters from Martha. 'She wrote beautifully about her professors and roommates and mid-term exams.'<sup>136</sup> But this connection to home, to romantic attachment is dangerous because he spends his time daydreaming about Martha and not focusing on the task at hand. The other homes in the story are the unmentioned homes of village of Than Khe, which they destroy in revenge for Lavender's death:

After the chopper took Lavender away, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men to the village of Than Khe. They burned everything. They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well, they called in artillery and watched the wreckage'<sup>137</sup>

In *Vietnam Stories: Innocence Lost*, Herzog argues 'a soldier's pursuit of order and control in his life and in his environment becomes one of the most common responses to this war

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<sup>134</sup> Hemingway, p.317.

<sup>135</sup> Hemingway, p. 318.

<sup>136</sup> Tim O'Brien 'The Things they Carried', in *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1991), pp.3-21 (p.3).

<sup>137</sup> Tim O'Brien, p.14.



initiation and loss of innocence'.<sup>138</sup> This is evident in this story when the Lieutenant loses his 'innocence' after the death of Lavender and blames himself for the death. But this loss of innocence is also a cutting off from attachments to home. Only when he fully enters the masculine realm of war and cuts off from the feminine realm of home and romantic feeling, (he realises she is not emotionally involved with him and never mentions the war in the letters) can he become a responsible Lieutenant:

This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or mid-term exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity.<sup>139</sup>

After he burns the letters, he is 'now determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence...He would show strength, distancing himself...he would dispense with love; it was not now a factor.'<sup>140</sup> In this story home and war are set apart. The 'moral development' and change of the main character is linked to his rejection of home and emotional attachment. This change in Jimmy Cross highlights the 'senselessness and pointlessness of the Vietnam War' because despite his 'self-recriminations there is no evidence that Cross did anything wrong; a sniper picked a target and fired and there was nothing any of them could have done'.<sup>141</sup> But the result of this is an act of carnage: the destruction of the village and other people's homes. An act of violence which remains muted in the story.

'To Basra' is probably the story that fits into the traditional category of war fiction as it focuses on the experiences of a soldier. Phil has been discharged from the army and is returning home to tell his family. Similarly to Hemingway's 'Soldier's Home', it is about a homecoming, but Phil's sense of alienation is different to Krebs'. While Krebs struggles to fit into civilian life after the war, Phil struggled to become or act like a soldier. He is traumatised by the training and he is unable to do what a soldier is supposed to do, which is to fight. He is alienated because he is unable to explain his inability to be a soldier to his

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<sup>138</sup> Herzog, p.33.

<sup>139</sup> O'Brien, p.20.

<sup>140</sup> O'Brien, p.20-21.

<sup>141</sup> Brady Harrison, 'Tim O'Brien' in *A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), pp.309-316 (p.311-312).

family and friends; they see him as a failure. In 'The Things They Carried', First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross performs 'duties firmly and without negligence' by shutting down 'his daydreams' of Martha and home.<sup>142</sup> In 'To Basra' it is Phil's remembrance of home that stops him from destroying homes in Iraq, as he tries to explain to the lad he meets: 'You know like, if someone came round your mam's gaff and looked in all the cupboards, throwing shit everywhere'. Inside a house that he likens to his mother's he cannot 'act' like a soldier and forget personal feeling. He has rejected war and masculine codes of violence. Returning home means facing his family's and friend's reactions and expectations.

In the first draft of the story there was not much hope at the end. Outside a pub, he meets a teenager, who seems to be a figment of his former self, and tells him about what happened in Iraq. Phil leaves and ends up drinking next to some old drunks in another pub. Outside the codes of masculinity, there was no future in society other than becoming an 'old drunk'. This first draft was written in the third person and focalised through Phil. The narrative voice was supposed to be his and did not comment on the situation. But the narrative voice was opaque; it rarely entered into his consciousness. Feedback suggested that this makes him unsympathetic and they therefore 'condemned' his behaviour, which resulted in the deaths of other soldiers. The readers condemned him like his family and friends would. I realised that I had tried to write with the opacity and minimalism of Hemingway and Carver. But really, I wanted Phil's Mancunian voice to stand out. In my early drafts, the narrative voice was not minimalist, it was flat. I rewrote the story in the first person, and brought out his Mancunian accent. But in the re-write I overdid his use of dialect and slang, so I toned it down to suggest his Mancunian voice, but not parody it. When I rewrote the story I wrote a new draft instead of editing it from the third to first person. In doing so, the story moved in a different direction. The first draft of this was too static (a problem I had noted in '33 Bullets'). The ending in the pub was very bleak and flat. In the re-write I developed the relationship between Phil and the lad he meets in the pub. In the first draft, he told the lad about his experiences pretty quickly, and this read unnaturally, almost forced. In the rewrite, the boy follows him out of the pub and down the entry and to the park. The lad pesters Phil and asks him about the war until Phil tells him. As I discussed earlier, I have had difficulties in writing the endings of a number of stories in the collection. Similarly to Isabel Allende, the ending worked better when I followed the

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<sup>142</sup> Tim O'Brien, p.21.



character and did not 'over think' it. Rather than a bleak scene in a pub, the characters escape from the man in the pub to the park and go on a roundabout. In this ending, there is hope, though it is in a retreat from the world to a moment of childish fun.

Hassan Blasim and Aleksandar Hemon write from different perspectives to Tim O'Brien and Ernest Hemingway; in their stories, war and home are positioned differently. Hassan Blasim's stories in *The Madman of Freedom Square* span the Iran-Iraq War to the Occupation. Aleksandar Hemon is Bosnian and emigrated to the States in 1992, just at the beginning of the Bosnian conflict. War circles the edges of *The Question of Bruno*.<sup>143</sup> In Aleksandar Hemon's 'Islands', a holiday reveals the narrator's family's personal tragedy during the Soviet era. The narrator is a nine-year old boy. He and his family are visiting their aunt and Uncle Julius, who are Ukrainian immigrants. The story is divided into sections of fragments, which recalls the structure of Donald Barthelme's 'Views of My Father Weeping'.<sup>144</sup> The sectioning breaks up the linearity and continuity of the narrative. The idyllic scenes of the holiday on Mljet Island are juxtaposed to Uncle Julius' stories of his experiences in Stalin's camps, of burying corpses, and prisoners murdering each other in a fight for survival. The family is haunted by this trauma.

Michael Orlofsky defines *historiografiction* 'as the literary treatment of persons or events from the past. It is a corrective label to *historical fiction*.' The word itself is a 'postmodernist construction assembled from the words *historiography* and *fiction*' (italics his). For Orlofsky, historiografiction is primarily concerned with character, while historical fiction is motivated by 'plot, setting, details or lifestyle'.<sup>145</sup> Donald Barthelme's 'Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning' is a collage of fragments, press releases, anecdotes and news clippings, which Orlofsky argues is 'fashioned into a biographical study'. Though this 'biographical study' attempts to show us the meaning of Kennedy's life', it serves to highlight the unknowability of Kennedy.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Aleksandar Hemon, *The Question of Bruno* (London: Picador, 2000).

<sup>144</sup> Donald Barthelme, 'Views of My Father Weeping', in *Sixty Stories* (London: Penguin, 2003) pp.109-120.

<sup>145</sup><sup>145</sup> Michael Orlofsky, 'Historiografiction: The Fictionalisation of History in the Short Story' in *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*, ed. by Farhat Iftekharrudin, Joseph Boyden, Mary Rohrberger and Jale Caludet (Westport: Praeger, 2003) pp.47-62 (.47-8).

<sup>146</sup> Michael Orlofsky, p.52-3.

In 'The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders', 'The Sorge Spy Ring' and 'The Accordion' write the histories of the two World Wars using the 'postmodern' historiografictional tactics of Donald Barthelme, and Jorge Luis Borges. There is a postmodern merging of historical facts, famous historical figures with illusion and self-conscious fictionality. In 'The Life and Works of Alphonse Kauders', there are quotes of what Kauders has said to Goebbels, Stalin, Eva Braun, The Arch Duke Ferdinand, The Arch Duke Ferdinand's wife, Josef B. Tito, and more. These quotes have a macabre humour and irreverence:

Alphonse Kauders said to Adolf Hitler, in Munich, as they were guzzling down their seventh mug of beer:

"God, mine is always hard when it is needed. And it is always needed."

Alphonse Kauders impregnated Eva Braun, and she, in the course of time, delivered a child. But after Adolf Hitler began establishing new order and discipline and seducing Eva Braun, she, intoxicated by the Fuhrer's virility, sent the child to a concentration camp, forcing herself to believe it was only for the summer.<sup>147</sup>

Here, the amalgamation of historical figures with self-conscious fictionality and macabre humour highlights the historical events rather than detracting from them. By self-conscious fictionality I mean the story foregrounds its fictionality in its use of repetition ('in the course of time' and the number seven), and claims to be factual, which are obviously fictional.

At the end of the story, there are three and a half pages of 'Notes on Kauders', which include biographical details on some of the lesser known figures who appear in the story, which assumes a knowledge or lack of knowledge on the part of the British or American reader. The 'author' of these notes appears to be the author of the collection. The style and tone attempts to be both that of an encyclopaedia and of personal memory, peppered with ironic adjectives:

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<sup>147</sup> Aleksander Hemon, 'The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders', in *The Question of Bruno* (London: Picador, 2000), pp. 21-37 (p.25).



J.B. Tito was the Yugoslav communist leader for thirty-five long years. My childhood was saturated with histories of his just enterprises. My favourite one has always been the one in which he, at the age of twelve, found a whole cooked pig's head in the house pantry...<sup>148</sup>

Similarly to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* the horrors of war and history are not approached in purely documental fashion or realism.

Hassan Blasim's *The Madman of Freedom Square* uses the surrealism of *Slaughterhouse Five* as well as magical realism and allegory to depict the horror of recent history of war and occupation in Iraq as well as the 'surreal experiences of undocumented migrants'. These stories do not directly depict the American or other troops in Iraq.<sup>149</sup> Death and dismembered bodies occur throughout the collection. Death is part of the everyday and in an integral structural feature to most of the stories. In 'The Corpse Exhibition', an institution pays people to kill 'clients' and display their dismembered bodies around the city. The story is written in the form of a manager's oral instruction to a new recruit:

Always remember, dear friend, that we are not terrorists whose aim is to bring down as many victims as possible in order to intimidate others, nor even crazy killers working for the sake of money. We have nothing to do with fanatical Islamist groups or the intelligence agency of some nefarious government...To display a corpse for others to see is the ultimate in the creativity we are seeking and which we are trying to study and benefit from.<sup>150</sup>

He tells the new recruit about a man who betrayed the project by attempting to steal corpses from a mortuary. The man was skinned alive by a mortician who turned out to be in charge of the 'truth and creativity department' of the institution. At the end of the speech, the manager thrusts the knife into the new recruit's stomach and says, 'You're shaking.'<sup>151</sup> The listener is obviously not up to the task, so will become part of the

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<sup>148</sup> Aleksandar Hemon, p. 34.

<sup>149</sup> In a reading at the Manchester Literature Festival, Blasim was asked why. He said that he was unable to depict them. It was up to an American or British writer to portray the troops.

<sup>150</sup> Hassan Blasim, 'The Corpse Exhibition', in *The Madman of Freedom Square* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2009), pp.45-51 (p.46).

<sup>151</sup> Hassan Blasim, p.51.

exhibition. The dead and dismembered body has become the supreme work of art. The ubiquity of violence defies realism as a means of representation. Instead, this story is a postmodern parable of violence.

In 'Their Last Holiday' I used horror conventions to write about being complicit in violence. Similarly to 'The Bunker', I returned to the 'epical' structure to write this story. In 'Their Last Holiday' I tried to place the first person narrator at the centre of the violence. Rather than being a bystander, as in 'The Bunker', the narrator is drawn into the violence. She is excited by it. In doing so, I tried to use the walking dead or Zombie trope to show 'normal' people's propensity for violence. However, the issue is whether using the tropes of the horror genre mean that the story replicates violence rather than questioning it. The difference might lie in the ending. Alisa Cox describes the allure of horror fiction:

Horror stories tap into our deepest fears, about death, decay and suffering, yet they are also hugely enjoyable. One of the reasons for this is the sheer pleasure of narrative. Like any good yarn, a horror story offers a clear dramatic structure with a beginning that whets the appetite and a resounding conclusion.<sup>152</sup>

Cox argues that the resolution of the ending quells any fears that the narrative raises. Steven King counteracts the disturbing elements in his short stories by granting a happy ending. In 'Their Last Holiday', the ending is not 'a resounding conclusion'. The couple end up embroiled in violence and seem to become more of a threat than the zombies to the other people in the caravan park. This discussion recalls Robert Hampson's use of Roland Barthes' theory of the 'text of pleasure' and the 'text of bliss', which I discussed in section one.<sup>153</sup> By ending on a moment of violence, in which the first person narrator is complicit, the story 'discomforts' and does not fulfil the reader's expectations.<sup>154</sup> The story discomforts because the reader expects the first person narrator to be a sympathetic character. For most of the story she is sympathetic and personable. But the reader is led by the story to the ending where her boyfriend and she are shooting the other people in the caravan park.

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<sup>152</sup> Ailsa Cox, *Writing Short Stories: A Routledge Writers Guide* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.14.

<sup>153</sup> Robert Hampson, 'Johnny Panic and the Pleasures of Disruption', in *Re-reading the Short Story*, ed. by Clare Hanson (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp.69-85.

<sup>154</sup> Robert Hampson, p.69.



## The Writer in the Text

The preface to *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story* defines metafiction as not only being 'telling a story about telling a story', but also the 'desire to address the text and even the writer within the text' in order to call attention to its artifice and therefore 'attempt to view our world through another lens'.<sup>155</sup> This idea of the writer *within* the text, and not just anterior or exterior to it is played out in the work of Aleksandar Hemon, Tim O' Brian and Hassan Blasim. These writers place themselves as writers and narrators within their stories in order to account for their position and show the personal effects and trauma of war. While Tim O'Brien and Hassan Blasim are witnesses to war and write from personal experience of being a soldier in the Vietnam war and being a civilian during the Iraq-Iran war and recent Occupation of Iraq, Aleksandar Hemon writes from the position of witnessing the Bosnian conflict while in exile. However, in my writing I have positioned myself within the stories, and used a narrator very similar to myself to foreground my position as not being a direct participant or witness.

Hassan Blasim blurs the boundaries between the author, the narrator and the characters. 'The Market of Stories' features a fictional Iraqi writer called Khaled al-Hamrani, who has only ever written about the market near to his house in Baghdad. Al-Hamrani states, 'what I detest is looking for new experiences and places in order to say the same thing, because the whole world is reflected in the eyes of a single child, is it not? Or even in the blood of a slaughtered chicken in the market'.<sup>156</sup> Khaled al-Hamrani is blown up in a bomb in the market, but at the end of the story a first person narrator claims that two years have passed since he dreamed of dying in the market. The story blurs the division between the identities of the character al-Hamrani, the narrator and the author. This blurring of identity is paralleled in the blurring of nightmare and waking consciousness, a blurring which is repeated throughout the collection in 'The Reality and the Record' and 'The Nightmares of

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<sup>155</sup> 'Preface' in *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, ed. by Farhat Iftekharudin, Joseph Boyden, Joseph Longo and Mary Rohrberger (Westport: Greenwood, 2003), p.x.

<sup>156</sup> Hassan Blasim, 'The Market of Stories', in *The Madman of Freedom Square* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2009), pp.53-60 (p.53).

Carlos Fuentes'. This blurring of identity and fiction and reality does not merely highlight the fictionality of the writing, but conveys the surreal nightmare of war.

Aleksandar Hemon also positions himself as the narrator in a number of stories in *The Question of Bruno*. In 'An Exchange of Pleasant Words', Hemon recounts his family's attempts to forge a family tree. The 'Notes on Kauders' section of 'The Life and Works of Alphonse Kauders' brings in a narrator who proclaims at the end, 'now keep reading the book'.<sup>157</sup> This positioning of self in the collection places the personal in the historical; history and war is seen in terms of the family in 'Islands', the immigrant in 'Blind Josef Pronek' as well as the fictional and historical figures in 'The Life and Works of Alphonse Kauders'. In doing this, the effects of the wars in the Twentieth century are shown to be personal.

Tim O'Brien positions himself as both the author and narrator of many of the stories in *The Things They Carried*. In 'Love', which follows the title story, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross comes to visit the narrator, who is a writer. The narrator asks Jimmy if he can write about him in his book. 'Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, and all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever.'<sup>158</sup> In 'How To Tell A True War Story', he directly discusses writing war fiction and authenticity and takes on received notions and myths of war fiction:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behaviour, nor restrain men from doing things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of the war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made victim of a very old and terrible lie.<sup>159</sup>

O'Brien interrogates the ethics of writing about war. The traditional stories about war that offer redemption are immoral and part of 'a very old and terrible lie'. He positions himself

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<sup>157</sup> Aleksandar Hemon, p.37.

<sup>158</sup> Tim O'Brien, 'Love', in *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1991), pp.25-27 (p.27).

<sup>159</sup> Tim O'Brien, 'How to Tell a True War Story', in *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1991), pp.65-80 (p.68).



as a character, narrator and author in the collection in order to find an ethical aesthetics of writing about war.

Tim O'Brien also casts himself as a character in 'On a Rainy River', in which he runs away to avoid being drafted. He returns home when he realises he could not bear the shame of being a draft dodger: 'I was ashamed of my conscience, of doing the right thing... I would go to war – I would kill and maybe die – because I was embarrassed not to.'<sup>160</sup> For Brady Harrison, by casting himself as a character, Tim O'Brien 'personalises the anguish many soldiers felt'.<sup>161</sup> O'Brien's positioning of himself within the stories is no mere postmodern trickery. Neither are Blasim and Hemon's stories a 'Nike' commercial version of the innovative fiction of the Seventies. All three writers use different means to portray the horror and violence of their times. They foreground the writing process, and the writer within the story and as author of the story not just to repeat the postmodern disbelief that reality is real, but to portray the unreality and horror of war.

### Women Writing War

The gender politics of a woman writing about war during The Great War, which 'history has gendered... as male',<sup>162</sup> is interrogated and satirised in Edith Wharton's proto-metafictional story, 'Writing a War Story'. A young American woman, Miss Ivy Spang, who had 'published a little volume of verse before the [First World] war' is asked to write 'a rattling war story for to *The Men-at-Arms*, a monthly publication that was to bring joy to the wounded and disabled in British hospitals.'<sup>163</sup> To write the story, she goes away from Paris, where she served tea once a week in a military hospital, to stay with an old French governess. But Ivy lacks 'inspiration'. Ivy eventually bases her story on an anecdote told to her governess by a wounded soldier. However, the reception of her story is not what she had anticipated. In the hospital, none of the wounded soldiers have read her story, but all

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<sup>160</sup> Tim O'Brien, 'On a Rainy River', in *The Things They Carried* (London: Flamingo, 1992), pp.39-55 (p.48,54).

<sup>161</sup> Brady Harrison, 'Tim O'Brien' in *A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), pp.309-316 (p.313).

<sup>162</sup> Angela K. Smith, 'Introduction' to *Women's Writing of the First World War*, ed. by Angela K. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.1.

<sup>163</sup> Edith Wharton, 'Writing a War Story' in *Women's Writing on the First World War*, ed. by Agnes Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hathaway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.309.

request a copy of the magazine to have a copy of the 'jolly photo' as a reminder of her. One of the patients is Harold Harbard, a writer, but his response is withering: "'You've got hold of an awfully good subject," Harbard continued; "but you've rather mauled it, haven't you?"' He hopes she is not angry with his frankness, but says: 'I do want most awfully to ask you for one of these photographs.' She becomes angry, so he (and the story) concludes:

"You were angry just now because I didn't admire your story; and now you're angrier still because I admire your photograph. Do you wonder that we novelists find such an inexhaustible field in women?"<sup>164</sup>

In the patronising and disparaging reception of her work, both in the hospital and back in America, the story highlights the silencing of women that occurs when their 'education is limited and their primary social value is their appearance'<sup>165</sup>. She makes a 'jolly' photograph, and is re-positioned as only being fit for the subject of fiction, rather than the author of it. There are two layers of irony in the story; this ironic reversal and irony on the level of narration, which renders Ivy a 'comic figure'. Ivy is a comic unappreciated artist. The irony both comments on her ambitions and as Mary Carney highlights, the fact that she cannot fulfil her ambitions because of the 'regressive gender politics' in a world where she is brought up to be no more than an ornament.<sup>166</sup> The irony is also directed at Ivy through the distance between the narrator's discourse and free indirect speech. For example, the editor who originally reviewed Ivy's 'little volume of verse' sent a 'heavily marked copy to Miss Sprang who was immensely flattered, and felt that at last she had been understood.' But no one she knew read the journal so 'nothing in particular resulted from this tribute to her genius'.<sup>167</sup> 'Tribute to her genius' is clearly the narrator's words, not Ivy's. I am highlighting this because in contrast to the previous stories in which there is an obvious identification between the author and the writer-character in the stories, there is no identification here. The narrator and therefore Wharton herself is distanced from Ivy, who is trapped and remains, as the final line states, the subject, not the author, of fiction.

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<sup>164</sup> Edith Wharton, p.319.

<sup>165</sup> Mary Carney, 'Wharton's Short Fiction of War: The Politics of Coming Home', in *Postmodern Approaches to the Short Story*, ed. by Farhat Iftekharudin (USA: Praeger, 2003), pp.109- 120 (p.116).

<sup>166</sup> Mary Carney, p.118.

<sup>167</sup> Edith Wharton, p.309.



As discussed above, in war literature there is a claim for the authentic male voice. As Mary Carney argues, 'the canon of war literature' has 'long disdained women's voices'.<sup>168</sup> This is still evident in anthologies of war writing. In *The Vintage Book of War Stories*, only three women writers, Kay Boyle, Elizabeth Bowen and Pat Barker, are included. And indeed, Kay Boyle's and Pat Barker's work is more similar to traditional war fiction in its focus on the soldiers rather than others affected by war. Kay Boyle's story, 'The Defeat' describes the defeat of France in 1940 and the extract from Barker's *Regeneration* focuses on Siegfried Sassoon's refusal to fight.<sup>169</sup> Recent anthologies such as *Women's Writing on the First World War*,<sup>170</sup> Angela K. Smith's *Women's Writing of the First World War*<sup>171</sup> and *Hearts Undeclared: Women's Writing on the Second World War*,<sup>172</sup> have sought to redress this in-balance by including letters, diaries, and fiction written by women. These anthologies ask us 'to reconsider what we should understand by war writing'.<sup>173</sup> So while my story, 'To Basra' is evidently about a soldier and his response to combat, in my other stories I have approached 'war' from different perspectives.

In 'The War Tour' I tried to think about the ethics of writing about war without direct experience (a topic I discussed earlier) as well as the process of writing a war story itself. I decided to depict an author of a collection of stories like mine as an appropriator of voices, one who is insensitive to people's privacy and needs and a little naive and clumsy. I situated this story as a travel narrative, as a kind of colonial traveller scooping up people's stories. However, in feedback, I realised I had 'over-egged' the issue. What is so wrong about being naive? I was asked. Is going beyond the tourism industry to speak to someone directly involved not that bad? At this point in the drafts, I had overstated the issues. There were phrases in the narration such as 'I was worried...I should not have asked her about the war...' which I then decided to delete.

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<sup>168</sup> Mary Carney, p.109.

<sup>169</sup> Kay Boyle, 'Defeat', in *The Vintage Book of War Stories*, ed. by Sebastian Faulks and Jorg Hensgen (London: Vintage, 1999), pp.142-144.

<sup>170</sup> *Women's Writing on the First World War* ed. by Agnes Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hathaway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>171</sup> *Women's Writing of the First World War: An Anthology* ed. by Angela K. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

<sup>172</sup> *Hearts Undeclared: Women's Writing of the Second World War*, ed. by Jenny Hartley (London: Virago, 1995).

<sup>173</sup> Cardinal et al, p. 1.

At this point, the story was about two friends on holiday, and the issues I wanted to raise were rather muted. I redrafted the story so that it was about a couple on holiday. Though in a very different set of cultural circumstances to Edith Wharton's 'Writing A War Story', by reframing the story as being part of a relationship, I could bring up questions of gender and authority in writing. The narrator's boyfriend, who is a PhD student, criticises the narrator, and is bored by her continually talking about her writing. In so doing, I attempted to foreground how the authority of writing about war and dealing with these issues is still gendered.

Similarly to Hemon and Blassim, my stories remain within a fictional world. The narrator or author in my stories, though she steps out from behind the theatre's curtain, keeps up a fictional pretence. They are not about the act of storytelling itself, as in the metafiction of John Barthes; they are not simply foregrounding the fiction of fiction again. In the work of O'Brien, Hemon and Blassim, there is a moral imperative to write these stories. As a white woman writer, my moral imperative does not result from a direct experience of war, but from living in a country that is at war, but whose devastating effects are felt in other parts of the world.

### **Women Writing War and the Effects on the Home**

Women hold a peculiar relationship to war literature. Since *The Iliad*, 'women have had their place as watchers and mourners, and as symbols of what men are fighting for'. As the above anthologies show, this changed with the First World War, where women 'entered the arena of war' and took on different roles.<sup>174</sup> Similarly to Edith Wharton, the women writers I will discuss are often aware of the gendered implications of writing about war and of war itself. Writing during the Second World War, Virginia Woolf thought about the possibilities of peace in 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid'. She noted a young airman's desire 'to earn undying honour'. He is:

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<sup>174</sup>*Hearts Undefeated: Women's Writing of the Second World War*, ed. by Jenny Hartley (London: Virago, 1995), p.5.



driven by voices in himself – ancient instincts, instincts fostered and cherished by education and tradition...We must help the young Englishman to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations. We must create more honourable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instinct.<sup>175</sup>

For Woolf, the question of war is about a question of gender; men's nurtured or natural 'instinct' for conflict. Post-second wave feminist critics have refused the binary of men's predisposition for conflict as opposed to women's love of peace. For example, Gill Plain begins her analysis of *Women Writing the Second World War* with the premise that:

Women are not inherently opposed to war, any more than they are congenitally inclined towards sentimentality, nurturance and the colour pink. Rather they are set in opposition to conflict by the cultural codes and norms of twentieth-century society.<sup>176</sup>

In John Limon's section on women writers, he asserts that, 'In women's war fiction, questions of war are posed as questions of family'.<sup>177</sup> Reading this quotation, it could seem that women writers have 'domesticated' war, or skewed it in some way. But I would argue against that. While traditional war fiction focuses on the experiences of the soldier, many women writers have written about the effects war has on combatants and non-combatants; on the family and the next generation. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*, and recently Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, the focus is on the psychological effects of war, and in particular, the trench warfare of the First World War. Similarly to Hemingway's 'A Soldier's Home', these novels explore the soldier's return home, rather than focusing on direct combat. In Fussell's categories, the novels focus on the soldier's struggle to adjust to civilian life. More accurately, they show the impossibility of adjustment and overcoming the psychological trauma. In contrast, Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* explores the repercussions of the Second World War on those not directly involved in Germany: a disabled man who is unable to join the army, the

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<sup>175</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1961), p.210-211.

<sup>176</sup> Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of The Second World War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.ix.

<sup>177</sup> John Limon, *Writing After War: From Realism to Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 219.

children of Nazis and a second generation German. Katherine Mansfield's story 'Six Years After' portrays how a married couple deals with the loss of their son after the First World War, while Nadine Gordimer's 'The Ultimate Safari', which I have already discussed, looks at the effects of war on a family who have lost their home in Mozambique. As Jenny Hartley claims, these women writers are interested in 'the effects rather than the deeds of war'.<sup>178</sup>

Bobbie Ann Mason's 'Big Bertha Stories' focuses the effects of the Vietnam War on a family and a family home in the United States. The story is narrated from the perspective of Jeanette, the veteran's wife. It is only years afterwards that Donald shows signs of psychological trauma, so he has gone away to work at a strip mine. In going away, Jeannette supposes, 'He is sparing them his darkest moods, when he can't cope with his memories of Vietnam. Vietnam had never seemed such a meaningful fact until a couple of years ago, when he grew depressed and moody.'<sup>179</sup> When he returns to the family home he tells their son, Rodney, stories about Big Bertha, the machine used for mining. But these stories are really about the war; they are called, 'Big Bertha and the Neutron Bomb', 'Big Bertha and the MX Missile'. However, Jeanette does not want Donald to talk about Vietnam; she thinks he should live in the present. 'Wasn't Vietnam a long time ago?' she asks, when Donald tries to explain that if they had had Big Bertha in Vietnam, they might have won the war. But Vietnam is 'a meaningful fact' that cannot be placed neatly in the past. It has continuing repercussions in the family home. Even their son has 'dreams of Big Bertha, echoes of his father's nightmare, like TV cartoon versions of Donald's memories of the war.'<sup>180</sup>

The story is focalised through Jeanette. The reader comes to understand Donald's memories of Vietnam through the stories he tries to tell her about the war. She tries to make meaning of them, but the stories are inchoate and the main story about a girl he met there, has no ending, so Jeanette finds it difficult to understand. Jeanette asks:

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know."

"Is that the end of the story?"

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<sup>178</sup> Jenny Hartley, p.5.

<sup>179</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, 'Big Bertha Stories', in *Love Life* (London: Vintage, 1989), pp 132-149 (p.134).

<sup>180</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, p.135.



"I don't know.' Donald pauses, then goes on talking about the village, the girl, the banana leaves, talking in a monotone that is making Jeanette's flesh crawl. He could be the news from the next room.

"You must really have liked that place. Do you wish you could go back there to find out what happened to her?

"It's not there anymore," he says. "It blew up."<sup>181</sup>

Donald's story is unfinished and inchoate, but it also has the finality of destruction: 'it blew up'. Donald checks into a VA Hospital for treatment and things seem to get better for Jeanette. She buys a trampoline and bounces on it with her son, but at the end of 'Big Bertha Stories', this moment of innocent fun is destroyed by a neighbour's comment: 'You'll tear your insides loose'. 'That night she has a nightmare about the trampoline. In her dream she is 'jumping on soft moss, and then it turns into a springy pile of dead bodies.'<sup>182</sup> This final image disrupts any notion of recovery, as the nightmares and memories of Vietnam spread through the family. There is no 'ending' to the effects of war.

Similarly to 'Big Bertha Stories', in 'Down Duchy Road' the effects of war reach into the home. Many years later Margery is still damaged by her husband's violence, which stems from his experiences in the army. Living in a dingy flat in Salford, she is an alcoholic. She tells the narrator about how she met her husband, and went to live with him 'on base' in South Carolina. He became increasingly cruel and violent after participating in the Gulf war, while she began to drink. She tells this story to Karen the narrator, who visits her with *The Watchtower*. A reader said that when she began the story she thought she was in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* territory, but was pleased to find that the story does not depict Karen or John as religious 'nuts'. Karen is surprised at the end of the story, because the woman she has brought with her to visit Margery 'does not talk about *The Watchtower*. Instead, she confides in Margery and Karen: "'My husband was violent,' she said. 'It took me years to leave him'." But this moment of friendship and community is transient. When Karen visits Margery afterwards, Margery becomes less coherent. One day she is not there and the flat is boarded up. Karen does not find out what has happened to Margery.

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<sup>181</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, p.46.

<sup>182</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, p.149.

Similarly to 'Big Bertha Stories' telling or narrating what has happened does not easily signify recovery; the experiences are not easily contained in the past.

In 'Down Duchy Road', as in 'The War Tour' and 'To Basra', there is a story within a story. The problem with this is, as I discussed earlier, the crafting of the character's voice as she tells the story. All of the story in direct speech can be hard to sustain and can feel clumsy. But if too much is in reported speech, then the voice of the character is lost. During the drafting process I tried to differentiate between the stories: In early drafts, a lot of Margery's story was in reported speech, and feedback suggested the reader wanted to hear more of her story in her voice. In rewriting it, I wrote her entire story in direct speech because in the redraft her voice came through naturally. But in 'The War Tour' I ended up turning Aida's story into a written story. In the early draft, there were scenes and summary, which linked the scenes, interspersed with the narrator's and Aida's conversation. I decided to take out the summary because there was no overriding story; I realised that similarly to Hemon's 'The Island', which is written in a series of fragments and vignettes, Aida's childhood memories were diffused and inchoate rather than linear. The vignettes are a series of memories of living under siege in Sarajevo rather than a linear narrative. However, these personal experiences of conflict offer something more meaningful than the impersonal and voyeuristic narratives of war from the tourism industry, where war becomes just another attraction.

'The War Tour' places the home at the centre of conflict. The family are contained in their kitchen and rarely leave the house because of sniper fire. In this story the home is both a safe and threatened place. The first draft focused on the parent's responses to the conflict. The father retreated into himself and became immobile, while the mother never stopped working. After feedback that said there was not much going on in the story, I thought that the father's response could be about more than an inability to cope with the situation and more of a reaction to the nature of the conflict and the enmity between the two sides and people who had previously been neighbours. He then became a hero and tried to save his Serbian neighbours from reprisals. But feedback suggested that this narrative did not ring 'true' and repeated myths of heroism I was actually writing against. It seemed to replicate what Tim O'Brien criticises in 'How To Write A True War Story', when he states, 'a true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest proper



models for human behaviour'.<sup>183</sup> As I rewrote the story, I realised that Aida's father would not be heroic; he would not save their neighbours. He would do nothing as their home is destroyed. In this story, the home is the battleground.

While home is where the effects of war are felt in the above stories, war and oppression mean the loss of home for the refugees in 'What He Doesn't Tell Her' and '33 Bullets'. Japhet, who appears in both stories, was captured by Congolese rebels when he is a child, and forced to become a child soldier. At the heart of his story is the loss of his home. Because, as I discussed earlier, the story was written for a reading, his story is narrated in a linear fashion through free indirect speech and narration. I used dense, evocative language to convey the certain moments and times in his life. The narration hints at the violence, but in using the simile of leaves, the violence becomes part of the landscape:

They were taken to a camp surrounded by green, sweet smelling trees where they slept jammed together and ate bowls of watery rice. Three days later he was made to shoot a boy, who crumpled on the floor, as if he was made of leaves. Then they were marched along the shores of Lake Kivu and for the first time he saw how its water flooded the horizon.

He only returns to his home village when he hears that there is a threat to it from the rebels and the army. But in returning home, he puts himself in danger and has to leave the Congo:

Chada was deserted. Japhet crept around, wondering which hut had been his home. From the tracks, the scattered pots and wood, the lame goat tied to a pole, he could see they had left quickly. They must have fled to refugee camps. He untied the goat, so it could run off into the forest, but it hobbled a few paces then stood and watched Japhet sitting on the ground, fingering the dark, hard earth.

In some ways this story seems finished and done, but I am also not entirely satisfied with it. The narration and imagery which skirt over the violence could be viewed as problematic. What the story does do is foreground the reader's own position in relation to reading and writing about war. The female character is at a reading when she is faced with

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<sup>183</sup> Tim O'Brien, p.68.

the effects of war in The Congo and immigration system's treatment of asylum seekers. She is momentarily jerked out of her normal life as she follows the van, but in the end she does nothing and returns home.

In the above stories I have tried to highlight how women writers have focused on the effects of war on the family and I have discussed the necessity of speaking of war, but this act of speech or writing does not offer easy consolation. In Bobbie Ann Mason's 'Big Bertha Stories', telling stories about the Vietnam war does not place it safely in the past; the memories are always in the present. In 'Down Duchy Road' Margery's narration of her experiences offers momentary consolation, but it does not 'save' her. However, In 'The War Tour', Aida's memories are more meaningful than the voyeurism of the tourism industry. These narratives of war show its devastating effects on the family and home, both at the time and many years later.

### War, Romance and Gender

Katherine Mansfield's 'An Indiscreet Journey' is, explains the introduction in *Women's Writing on the First World War*, based on a 'journey in 1915 to the French town of Grey, forbidden to women visitors as it was in the *zone des armées*, and a sexual escapade with Corporal Francis Carco'.<sup>184</sup> This story conveys the narrator's excitement at the journey as well as the subterfuge of sneaking into the town and drinking with the soldiers after the curfew. In this story, the First World War opens up opportunities for Mansfield.

Elizabeth Bowen's novel, *The Heat of the Day* describes the taut atmosphere, the 'desperate and romantic undercurrents' of London during the blitz:

Out of mists of morning charred by the smoke from ruins each day rose to a height of unmisty glitter; between the last of sunset and first note of the siren the darkening glassy tenseness of evening was drawn fine.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Agnes Cardinal et al., p.255.

<sup>185</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'Everybody in London was in love', in *The Vintage Book of War Stories*, ed by Sebastian Faulks and Jorg Hensgen (London: Vintage, 1999), pp.150-156 (p.150).



This atmosphere is tense and exciting, but in Elizabeth Bowen's 'The Demon Lover', the atmosphere of war-torn London in the Second World War is not romantic, it is uncanny. The empty and dilapidated buildings create an eerie, lonely and 'unfamiliar' atmosphere:

Against the next batch of clouds, already piling up ink-dark, broken chimneys and parapets stood out. In her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queerness had silted up; a cat wove itself in and out of the railings, but no human eye watched Mrs Drover's return.<sup>186</sup>

Mrs Drover has come home to collect some needed belongings, as she and her family have fled the blitz for the country. A letter is waiting for her on the table, addressed from her First World War fiancé, who went missing in action. The story gives an ironic twist to a soldier's 'homecoming' and to the notion of wartime romance because his return is not wanted. She calls a taxi, but when the driver turns round she realises it is him:

Mrs Driver's mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream. After that she continued to scream freely and beat with her gloved hands on the glass all round as the taxi, accelerating without mercy, made off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets.<sup>187</sup>

The story plays on the idea of waiting for a lover to return, of how women had to wait for news of the soldiers. The story conveys the sense of the fear of how soldiers are changed during the war; the man who returns is not someone Mrs Driver knows, but a demonic figure. The spectre of war and the blitz is figuratively given meaning; the psychological damage of war is shown through a new take on the ghost story's 'haunted house'; the unused, eerie house, and London itself is a 'ghost town' of deserted streets.

Edith Wharton's story set during the First World War, 'Coming home' tells a 'war story', but it reverses the traditional war story cliché. Mary Carney argues that:

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<sup>186</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Demon Lover', in *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 1983), pp.661-666 (p.661).

<sup>187</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, p.666.

Instead of a story focusing primarily on a young man going off to war, it is about the war coming home to a young woman. The brave warrior who saves the home is not the soldier but the woman who loves him.<sup>188</sup>

'Coming Home' is narrated by a first person peripheral narrator, who accompanies Rechamp home to find out how his family and his betrothed have fared during the German's advances through France. This filtering device serves to distance the reader from the central acts of the story: Mlle Malo's sexual 'indiscretion' and Rechamp's murder of the German commander in an ambulance. Mlle Malo is celebrated in the village as a hero(ine), and the narrator sympathises with her (as well as with her fiancé). Mlle Malo saves the family by seducing the German general, but this act cannot be fully spoken about in the story, and has to be revenged for the sake of male honour.

In 'Lebensborn', Kari has a 'war romance' when she falls for the German soldier, Barend, and imagines them having a life together after the war. But this is not just a 'war romance'; Barend has been ordered to have a child with an Aryan woman. In Kari's diaries I focused on her emotions and fears. She is excited by Barend's attentions and gifts. But when the war ends, her relationship is seen as the ultimate collaboration and betrayal. In 'Lebensborn', gender and women's sexuality are situated in relation to a country's complicity. Kari and the other women in the story who have had relationships with German soldiers become scapegoats for the country's and population's own collaboration. I used two points of view in the story because the information and research into the Lebensborn has mostly focused on the experiences of the children.<sup>189</sup> As far as I could find out, the effects on the women had not been researched (of course, there are a lot of sources in Norwegian I could not access). In the debates around the Lebensborn, especially after a number of the 'Lebensborn' children sued the Norwegian government, the trauma of the mother's was not discussed.<sup>190</sup> In Kari's story, I used the diary format to convey her immediate experiences. I also used the diary form because a lot of non-fiction women's

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<sup>188</sup> Mary Carney, p.112.

<sup>189</sup> See for example, 'Norway's Lebensborn', *BBC*, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing\\_continents/1691452.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/1691452.stm)> [last accessed:13.01.2010], 'Children of Shame: Norway's Dark Secret', <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,336916,00.html>>, [last accessed: 13.01.2010], Catrine Clay and Michael Leapman, *Master Race: The Lebensborn Experiment in Nazi Germany* (London: Book Club Associates: 1995).

<sup>190</sup> 'Lebensborn Victims Head to Court: Children of Nazi Program to Sue Norway', *Spiegel Online International*, <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,470616,00.html>> [last accessed 13.01.2010].



writing about war and the Second World War in particular is in diaries. *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *A Woman of Berlin* are notable examples. *A Woman of Berlin* also places women's experiences and gender at the centre of war. It is a diary of a woman during the fall of Berlin at the end of the Second World War and discusses the mass rape of German women by Russian soldiers. After the war this is also an experience that cannot be discussed. The book's publication caused a huge controversy in Germany. In 'Lebensborn' Kari publishes her diary as part of an academic study. Unlike other *Lebensborn* children, Hanna does not sue the Norwegian government, she wants to forget, not remember. It is this process of speaking and forgetting that I attempt to explore in the story. As in the other stories, speaking of trauma offers no easy consolation.

I explored this question of gender, war and sexuality in 'Significant Objects in My Grandmother's life', which is also about a 'war romance'. The story is a series of vignettes, titled by 'objects': 'the gloves', 'the dinner service', the ballet shoes' that make up the grandmother's life. The narrator admits that when she thinks of her grandmother's romance with the American pilot, the picture is romanticised:

**The Cufflinks in the Jewellery Box** were given to her a few weeks before G for George's death. I don't know the details, but if when I imagine them it's clichéd. Perhaps they met at a dance, or while walking round a square in Portsmouth. She'd be in her WRENS uniform. It would be very romantic and intense.

Years later, after the grandmother has married the narrator's grandfather, the grandmother is silent and sulky while her family eats dinner. The loss of her lover and child, the effects of the war, swathe the dinner table:

But she was not hungry; her stomach was churning. My grandfather's barking was still in her ears, like an ongoing gale. Her children were eager, their hands wanted to reach for the cutlery but they knew not to. She was silent and her hands were in her lap. This was the only weapon she had. She held it against her chest, nursed it, and felt it build in her, churning and potent against what felt like tears in her stomach.

In both 'Lebensborn' and 'Significant Objects' the 'war stories' are narrated or read by the succeeding generation, who tries makes sense and meaning of their experiences; these stories are part of family history. But their trauma is not just the experience of war, but also about the gender politics of the time. In 'Lebensborn', women were scapegoats for the country's own complicity and in 'Objects', the sexual freedom experienced during the war is curtailed on a return to a small town in Scotland.



## Section 6

### Writing The Self: Childhood and the Home

In Ailsa Cox's section 'Writing The Self' in *The Creative Writing Handbook*, she argues that autobiographical writing can be an act of empowerment as well as an instrument of social consciousness because it links the private self to wider social issues. At the same time she reminds the reader that 'any literary text is a construct, shaped for its potential readership. Memory itself is selective.'<sup>191</sup> In postmodern writing, the expression of an essential or authentic self has been seen as an illusion; there is no 'real me' waiting to be discovered, no 'true story'. Hence the title of the John Barth story, 'Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction'.<sup>192</sup>

Many stories about childhood interrogate the act of writing the self. In Jamaica Kinkaid's 'Gwen', a twelve-year old girl attends a new school. In this story she goes from the shy outsider to top girl who belittles other newcomers. At school she has to write an 'autobiographical essay', which wins a good reaction in the class. But in the essay she changes her mother's reaction to a bad dream she had:

I didn't exactly tell a lie about the last part. That is just what would have happened in the old days. But actually the past year saw me launched into young-ladyness, and when I told my mother of my dream – my nightmare really – I was greeted with a turned back and a warning against eating certain kinds of fruit in an unripe state just before going to bed. I placed the old day's version before my classmates because, I thought, I couldn't bear to show my mother in a bad light before people who barely knew her. But the real truth was I couldn't bear to have anyone see how deep in disfavour I was with my mother.<sup>193</sup>

There are two levels of narrated selves in this story. The story is narrated by Gwen in the first person. Within the narrative, the essay narrates a story about her life that she wishes

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<sup>191</sup> Ailsa Cox, 'Writing The Self', in *The Creative Writing Handbook*, ed by John Singleton and Mary Luckhurst, (Hampshire, Palgrave, 2000), p. 78.

<sup>192</sup> John Barth, 'Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction', in *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Anchor, 1988).

<sup>193</sup> Jamiaca Kinkaid, 'Gwen', in *Childhood: An Anthology*, ed by Kate Figes (London: JM Dent, 1997), pp.142-156 (p.150).

were true. This double act of narration highlights how we fictionalise ourselves and how we rewrite our lives. This story is not about writing the self, as much as it is rewriting the self.

Rewriting the self is taken further in the metafictional story, 'Harvest' by Amy Hempel. In this story, the first person narrator tells the reader about a car accident, but as soon as the story gets started the narrator dismantles it and admits that many details are exaggerated or completely untrue:

I leave a lot out when I tell the truth. The same when I write a story. I'm going to start now to tell you what I left out of "The Harvest," and maybe begin to wonder why I had to leave it out.<sup>194</sup>

In so doing, the story emphasises how we alter the stories we tell about ourselves, how we select what is the truth. But it also goes further than this. It breaks down the division between what is truth and what is fiction since the narrator leaves 'a lot out' of both. Both 'Gwen' and 'The Harvest' explore the gap between the enunciating I and the enunciated; the speaking, narrating self and the childhood or younger self. This enunciated self becomes in effect, a character, seen from the outside and an invention of the narrator.

When a writer writes about childhood it is often assumed the writing is autobiographical. For me, this misses the point. Whether the writing stems from experience or not does not matter. My last sentence would seem to assume that it is an either or. Writing either stems from the self; is 'thinly veiled autobiography' or it is fiction. But every writer would testify to the complexity of the relationship between the self, the imagination and writing. As Hempel says, we leave a lot out of both. 'The Harvest' emphasises the act of narration as a fiction making process. Whatever events or details a story stems from, in writing it, or telling it, the event is not made present, it is not fully replicated and translated onto the page. Fiction does not offer us an easy window into history, memory or the world or ourselves.

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<sup>194</sup> Amy Hempel, 'The Harvest', in *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel* (New York: Scribner, 2006), pp.103-109 (p. 106).



In any case, childhood is a common theme in short fiction. So much so that Philip Stevick bemoaned its proliferation in 1971. He claimed that it was:

surprising and ultimately depressing...to see how many of the stories concern children, or adults with child-like minds, who grasp, in a way they do not fully understand, the nature of evil, always at the same relative point in the story, so that each story that represents such a character could be plotted on a graph, its action superimposed upon a graph of the other stories, showing that their shapes coincide.<sup>195</sup>

For Stevick, the subject matter of childhood is representative of the tiredness of the short story form in the mid twentieth century. While I would argue against his pejorative and simplistic evaluation, childhood experiences lend themselves to the short story form, and they are a subject matter writers return to. In her memoir *Giving up the Ghost*, Hilary Mantel states that she is haunted by her childhood, by the synaesthetic memory of it:

The story of my own childhood is a complicated sentence that I am always trying to finish, to finish and put behind me. It resists finishing, and partly this is because words are not enough; my early world was synaesthetic, and I am haunted by the ghosts of my own sense impressions, which re-emerge when I try to write, and shiver between the lines.<sup>196</sup>

For Mantel, her childhood is something unfinished, something that writing cannot fully capture; the sense impressions of childhood 'shiver between the lines' and continue to haunt her, even though they cannot be translated into words on the page.

In *When I Get Home*, instead of writing 'from' or 'about' childhood, there is an element of 'writing back' to childhood. This is not to say that these stories are autobiographical, or to spend the next section outlining what is fiction and what is autobiography or more likely, a complex mix of both. What I would like to do is explore how I have used personal

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<sup>195</sup> Philip Stevick, *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Short Fiction* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p.xii.

<sup>196</sup> Hilary Mantel, p. 144.

material in some of the stories, and develop this into a discussion of the childhood, the self and the home.

In 'Thermal Vest' I drew upon a formative moment in my own childhood. Similarly to Hilary Mantel's story, 'King Billy Is A Gentleman', this period of time is infused in my memory with a cold, desolate landscape. In 'King Billy,' the narrator is not trying to remember his childhood as such, it is more, as Mantel suggests above, being unable to forget:

I can't get out of my mind, now, the village where I was born, just out of the curl of the city's tentacles... It was a broken, sterile place, devoid of trees, like a transit camp; and yet with the hopeless permanence that transit camps tend to assume.<sup>197</sup>

In this story the childhood home is not the oneiric and protective space of Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*.<sup>198</sup> For Bachelard, 'we' return to the dreamt, remembered and imagined spaces of the childhood home in moments of 'reverie' or daydream for comfort and security. Rather, as in Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood's work, Mantel's childhood is nightmarish. There is no felicitous revelling in imaginations of intimacy and security, as in the poetry Bachelard analyses. In this story the childhood home is a haunted space:

My father had disappeared. Perhaps it was his presence, long and pallid, which slid behind the door in sweeps of draught and raised the heckles on the terrier's neck.<sup>199</sup>

The home is haunted, but the garden fence represents social convention; it becomes the border between their unconventional lives inside the home and the conventions of the local community. The narrator lives with his mother and a lodger who becomes her lover. They are despised by the villagers and the narrator is bullied at school. Over the garden fence, the neighbour, Myra, 'erupted' about his 'mother's immoral way of life; twittering in incoherent and long-bottled rage about the example set to her children, to the children of the garden's around.' In response his mother 'got up slowly from the chair where she had been taking the sun; she gave Myra one cursory unregarding glance, and walked silently

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<sup>197</sup> Hilary Mantel, 'King Billy is a Gentleman', in *Learning To Talk* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p.1-2.

<sup>198</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

<sup>199</sup> Hilary Mantel, p.2.



into the house, leaving her neighbour to hurl herself like a crazed budgerigar at Bob's good fences.' <sup>200</sup>

The narrator does not feel 'at home' anywhere. He states, 'my territory was shrinking: not the house, not the garden, not home and not school. All I owned was the space behind my ribs, and that too was a scarred battleground'.<sup>201</sup> But the turn in the story is when the narrator has grown up and his 'childhood seemed to belong to a much earlier, greyer world.'<sup>202</sup> He returns home and his mother tells him that years earlier the boy next door blew himself up in the garden shed. This revelation of death disrupts the narrator's certainty about himself and his past. Similarly to Alice Munro's 'Child's Play', childhood is placed in close proximity to death. It is death that haunts the stories, and the knowledge of death that is 'grasped'. As in Alice Munro's 'Home', which I discussed in section three, the act of homecoming separates the childhood and adult self.

In 'King Billy is a Gentleman', the narrator remembers the cold landscape of Lancashire. Similarly, in 'Thermal Vest', the narrator remembers the cold school yard in Winton:

I never dreamed of wearing a flimsy shirt, bearing my belly button and skinny arms; I hated the cold too much for that. The wind would rip round the quads and catch me unguarded. So I went to school prepared – in a long sleeve thermal vest and shorts with a lace trim, under two, sometimes three pairs of tights...The classrooms opened out onto the quads, as if the shell of the school had been removed. Jennifer and I would shiver outside the music room and huddle on the pavement corridor.

The 'first mystery' (to use Rose Tremain's term), the genesis of the story was my memory of being perpetually cold. For a while, I had half a page of the beginning of this story, which I did not know what to do with. I thought maybe it would develop in another direction, but the memory of being cold was also about another memory of being friendless. I developed the story and focused on the experience of friends turning into bullies. I wrote this story a couple of years ago and I am no longer sure whether the details

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<sup>200</sup> Hilary Mantel, p.6.

<sup>201</sup> Hilary Mantel, p.13.

<sup>202</sup> Mantel, p.17.

in it have replaced my memories or become mingled with them. In my mind, the story I have written has become stronger than the memories that generated it. I did not practise the violin in the music room at lunchtimes, but now it almost feels as if I did. In my mind, and my narrative of my teenage self, the moment in which I decided to not follow the crowd and stick by my friend was an important one. But now I wonder whether this moment, this decision is a story I have created about myself, or whether it has remained in my memory while other acts, ones which were not so 'heroic', have been forgotten.

In 'Down Duchy Road', writing the self was much more problematic. In 'Down Duchy Road' I wanted to avoid satire and as I discussed earlier, the portrayal of 'religious nuts'. Depictions of small religious groups in fiction are rarely complimentary. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is, of course, the iconic portrayal, but there is very little sympathy for the mother and members of the religious community in this novel. However, Julie Orringer's 'The Smoothest Way is Full of Stones' is no stereotyped depiction of Orthodox Judaism (though this statement is of course subjective – perhaps to someone from this background the story is stereotyped). For me, the story works against the reader's expectations and potential stereotype by a use of concrete and experiential detail and complex characterisation. The narrator is caught between the different views in her family, between the Orthodoxy of her cousins and the atheism of her parents. It is written in the present tense, so there is no commenting retrospective narrator.

The narrator is staying with her cousins 300 miles from home, while her mother recovers from the death of her baby. Her cousins and family have become Orthodox Jews. This way of life is very different to the narrator's life in Manhattan, in which her days 'are counted according to the American calendar and prayer is something [they] do once a year.'<sup>203</sup> During the time spent with her cousins, the narrator prays and follows the rituals. At first her cousin Esty seems pious and very different to the cousin she used to know. While swimming in the lake, fully clothed, they see their cousin, David Fronkel, hide a book by the lake. They find *Essence of Persimmon: Eastern Sexual Secrets for Western Lives*. They steal the book and over the next few days Esty's behaviour changes as her sexuality

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<sup>203</sup> Julie Orringer, 'The Smoothest Way is Full of Stones', *How to Breathe Underwater* (London: Penguin, 2005) p. 92-3.



awakens. At the end of the story, Esty gives the book back to Dovid Fronkel and kisses him. The narrator takes the book into the lake and lets go of it in the water: 'In my hand the book is heavy with water, and I let it fall away toward the bottom.'<sup>204</sup> This moment in the lake seems to signify her own awakening; but this awakening is not only sexual, but a kind of release from the restraints from both her religious and non religious family.

Colette Paul's story 'Guidance' from her collection *Whoever You Choose to Love* also depicts religious belief from a child's perspective. The story is narrated in the first person. Similarly to my story 'Fishfinger', it uses short sentences, simple syntax and declarative statements: 'Carrie is my little sister and she's frightened of almost anything.'<sup>205</sup> The narrator, her sister and her mother are part of a church, but her father is not. Her mother says that her father lost his arm because of 'The Other Woman'. But the narrator states:

Dad says Mum fills our heads with rubbish. He can take his plastic arm off and sometimes he waves it at us and chases us round the house. He can be really funny and nice and it makes me sad that he refuses to hear the Word, and won't be able to go to heaven to us.<sup>206</sup>

Here she conveys the different opinions in the family. The story builds up to the narrator being sexually abused at Sunday school:

It hurts, and I'm frightened, but I don't say anything. I listen to the noises, and the toilets dripping beside me. I know people shouldn't touch those places. Mum's told me. I know something bad's happening.<sup>207</sup>

The bad thing that is happening is contrasted in a conversation with her little sister about fear of the devil. 'She says wasn't that scary about the devil and I say yeah. "Do you think it's true?" I say, and Carrie says she doesn't know, it must be.'<sup>208</sup> This suggests that who

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<sup>204</sup> Orringer, p.121.

<sup>205</sup> Colette Paul, 'Guidance', *Whoever You Choose to Love* (London: Phoenix House, 2004) pp.58-67 (p.58).

<sup>206</sup> Colette Paul, p.59.

<sup>207</sup> Colette Paul, p.67.

<sup>208</sup> Colette Paul, p.67.

you should be scared of is not the devil. The narrator, even though the first person and the present tense is used, reveals what she does and does not know to the reader.

'Down Duchy Road' is closer to 'The Smoothest Way is Full of Stones' than it is to 'Guidance'. Memory played a big part in this story and I tried to 'be true' to my memory of my teenage self, and though there is a retrospective narrator, I tried to avoid narratorial comment. Instead, I tried to keep within the perspective of the one who 'sees' rather than the one who speaks, i.e. the younger self rather than the older self. For example, the narrator states: 'I was glad my school friends didn't live round here; I was terrified of them seeing me.' However, as in 'Guidance', even if the narrating self - the one who speaks - is close to the experiential self - the one who sees - there is still implicit comment. In writing this story it seemed impossible to completely return to this fourteen year old self and convey this story because I became aware that this old self might just be a fiction of my memory. In what I had considered nearly a finished draft, a friend noted that the details of the story were vague. Karen had generic magazines, but I had not given the magazines a name. It was as if I was being very cautious. 'Pin it down with a very firm thumb, this is the story I'm telling, here I am, everything, here's my stall,' she advised. I realised I was being cautious and there were complex reasons as to why I had not given concrete details in the story. The final draft has more concrete details. However, I knew I wanted to undercut the reader's assumptions. The story is not about a crisis of faith. But after other feedback, I realised there were also assumptions about Margery, who turns out to be more articulate and thoughtful than expected when she says to Karen:

"I've been thinking about what John asked. And no, I don't think a world without war is possible. Look around you. There's no end to it." She pointed around the kitchen, as if the evidence was in here.

This story developed from my memory of a woman I once met. She was an alcoholic anorexic and lived in a dingy flat in Salford. There were photos on the walls of her husband and son, who were in the United States army, but she never told me her story. 'Down Duchy Road' ends up being the story I invented about her past. While writing the story, the theme of the effects of war, which I discussed in the previous section, merged



with this story about adolescence. It seemed as if her past, and whatever happened in her family, was in some way a consequence of war.

While 'Thermal Vest' and 'Down Duchy Road' are personal stories, the other three childhood stories in *When I Get Home* are less so. Earlier, I discussed that after writing 'Thermal Vest' I was left wondering whether I had 'forgotten' my own acts of cruelty, and only remembered standing by my friend in the face of ostracism from other girls at school. How one might forget or remember being a bully is explored in 'The New Girl'. The use of the imperative and the form of 'The New Girl' is directly influenced by Lorrie Moore's collection *Self-Help*, and in particular, the story, 'A Kid's Guide to Divorce'.

In 'A Kid's Guide to Divorce', a child is watching a film with her mother, who is crying. It becomes apparent that the child has to 'care' for and manage her mother's emotions after the divorce:

Put extra salt on the popcorn because your mom'll say that she needs it because the part where Inger Bergman almost dies and the camera does tricks to elongate her torso sure gets her every time.<sup>209</sup>

The collection is a parody of self-help manuals and a guide to 'womanhood'. The imperative tense and use of the second person parodies the idea of self-help manuals.

In Julie Orringer's story, 'Notes to Sixth Grade Self,' the imperative is used as a way of depicting how to deal with adolescent cruelties and negotiating the complexities and pitfalls of friendships. An older self speaks back and advises the younger 'sixth grade self'. 'Note to Sixth Grade Self' places the younger self in the past. The second person and imperative is used to give advice to that sixth-grade self:

On Wednesdays wear a skirt. A skirt is better for dancing. After school, remember not to take the bus. Go to McDonald's instead. Order the fries. Don't even bother trying to sit with Patricia and Cara. Instead, try to sit with Sasha and Toni Sue.

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<sup>209</sup> Lorrie Moore, 'A Kid's Guide to Divorce', in *Self-Help* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p.49.

Moore's is a parody of self-help manuals, but her style is poetic and elliptical. Her narrative voice is impersonal; Moore does not explain the advice given, whereas in Orringer's 'Notes to Sixth Grade Self', the narrator is the older self and has intimate knowledge of the outcomes and future of that sixth grade self.

In 'The New Girl,' the narrator is an impersonal speaker, but the imperative tense catches something of the character's bossiness and cheeky attitude:

When the new girl arrives blow impossibly large bubbles from the staircase, then spit your bubblegum into a flowerpot. Dig your toe of your shoe into the hole in the carpet and watch her standing at the door, with her rucksack and short denim jacket. Call her (the new girl), 'New Girl' and when your mother yanks your elbow, pull away and say, 'Up Yours'. She will whisper in your ear, 'Her name is Sandra. You'll be fostered, you little madam.'

Sing: *I should be so lucky.*

The imperative implicates the reader in acts of cruelty: 'Ask her repeatedly about her life, her family and why they don't want her.' But I use the future tense and prolepsis to convey Geraldine's memory of her childhood self. Similarly to Munro's 'Child's Play' and Hilary Mantel's 'King Billy is a Gentleman', the questioning self is adult. As in 'King Billy', the culmination of the story involves a visit home. The parental home represents a childhood self, which contrasts to the returning adult self. In 'The New Girl', what her mother remembers contradicts Geraldine's memories:

Years later you will visit your mother for Sunday lunch... you will sit on the bed and remember wanting to pinch the new girl and how satisfactory it would be. And then your memory will falter. Maybe you did pinch her. Hard. On her upper arm, where the bruise would not show. You will leave the room. Unsure.

Similarly to 'King Billy is a Gentleman', it is the return home that puts the character's notion of self in jeopardy. In 'The New Girl', Geraldine's mother's revelation disrupts



Geraldine's sense of self. 'She will say in a voice you don't recognise, "You were a bully. I stopped fostering because of the way you were."'

In 'The New Girl' as in Alice Munro's 'Child's Play' and 'Face', and Julie Orringer's 'Notes to Sixth Grade Self', there is a fracturing of the self through the non linear structure and the gap between the enunciating and the enunciated. While 'Thermal Vest' conveys a clear linear structure and a vivid memory, and 'Down Duchy Road' closes this gap in order not to comment on the younger self, 'The New Girl' shows and enacts this gap between who speaks and who sees through the use of prolepsis and the second person.

### **Childhood and Death: The Uncanny Home**

Death often figures in stories of childhood. In Alice Munro's 'Child's Play', childhood is a dangerous place, though it seems 'distant and unimportant...only a starting point. As anything in childhood appeared to me then. Because of the journey I had made since, the achievement of adulthood. Safety.'<sup>210</sup> In 'Child's Play', the narrator recounts the story of her dislike of a 'special' girl called Verna. 'I suppose I hated her as some reason people hate snakes or caterpillars or mice or slugs. For no decent reason. Not for any certain harm that she could do but for the way she could disturb your innards and make you sick of your life.'<sup>211</sup> The story discloses how the narrator and her friend Marlene drowned the girl at summer camp. It is told retrospectively from old age when Marlene is dying of cancer and asking to make a confession. When they drown Verna, they do not feel 'wicked'. They are not 'triumphing in our wickedness. More as if we were doing just what was – amazingly – demanded of us, as if this was the high point, the culmination, in our lives, of our being ourselves.'<sup>212</sup>

In Julie Orringer's 'Pilgrims', children are again killers. A family is travelling to have dinner with people who engage in 'healing rituals' to heal their mother's cancer. The story is permeated with death and the adult's battle to hold it at bay with chemotherapy, 'which left her mother shaking so hard she had to be tied down' and 'healing rituals that required

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<sup>210</sup> Alice Munro, 'Child's Play', in *Too Much Happiness* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2009), p.210.

<sup>211</sup> Alice Munro, p. 200.

<sup>212</sup> Alice Munro, p. 222.

her mother to go outside and embrace trees or lie face-down on the grass.<sup>213</sup> The adults attempt to come to terms with cancer and death. Sitting around the dinner table, they think of Delilah, who has died of cancer: They clasped each other's hands and bent their heads. "Infinity to infinity," they repeated. "Dust into star".<sup>214</sup> But the children are bent on brutal games. Ella and her brother are fearful in this house, which is full of peace and vegan food, and yet full of cruel games in which children are tied up. One boy, Peter steals a glass of red water from his sister, Claire, which represents their dead mother. "She gets all crazy," said Peter. "Watch." He takes the glass up into the tree house and throws it over the edge. Reaching for it, Claire falls out of the tree house. 'Claire lay beside the trampoline, still as sleep, her neck at an impossible angle.'<sup>215</sup> Ella tries to tell her mother, who is meditating with the other adults, but her mother shoos her away. The adults are unaware as the children bury Claire in leaves and perform a kind of funeral. In this story, while the adults battle with mortality and their own proximity with death, they are ironically unaware of the proximity of death to their children.

In my story, 'Lad Lazarus', David has made a suicide pact while his mother is unaware and preoccupied with his sister's whereabouts. In Kate Atkinson's story 'Dissonance' in her collection *Not the End of the World*, the third person narrator alternately focalises through the brother and the sister. This is used to comic effect.<sup>216</sup> Kate Atkinson's story inspired the narrative voices of 'Lad Lazarus'. Although there are structural similarities, my story has a different tone to 'Dissonance'. It is darker and less comic. Both brother and sister in 'Dissonance' move towards a moment of change. In 'Lad Lazarus', the brother and sister are in 'dangerous' situations.

Initially, it was a lot easier to write Kate's section than David's. This was because her parts were dynamic; there was action and change, whereas David is sitting in his room and typing on his computer. The principal narrative drive in his sections is Dia's revelation that she wants to commit suicide tonight, rather than when they had previously planned. He realises he is not 'ready', and is frightened by the reality of the suicide pact.

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<sup>213</sup> Julie Orringer, 'Pilgrims', in *How to Breathe Underwater* (London: Penguin, 2003), p.3-4.

<sup>214</sup> Julie Orringer, p.16.

<sup>215</sup> Julie Orringer, p.18-19.

<sup>216</sup> Kate Atkinson, 'Dissonance', in *Not the End of the World* (London: Doubleday, Transworld Publishers, 2002).



There is a destructive relationship in both story lines. I wanted Kate's story to be about a girl being coerced into having sex, but as I wrote it, she managed to escape. In David's storyline, he eventually leaves the house and goes to the bus stop where they were going to meet and waits for her. When she arrives she is bent on killing herself, and asks him to show her where the clearing was that he had told her about. He shows her and follows her there. During the preceding weeks David has not only fantasised about their mutual suicides but also about having sex with her. He tries to kiss her and leans on top of her, but her reaction is swift and violent. She knocks him over and starts to beat him up. She then goes, leaving him in the dark.

I initially ended the story with him waiting at the bus stop. This ending was less of an ending and more of a cliff hanger. What did it mean? Similarly to some of my other stories, the ending was not really an ending. It just stopped. This was neither an open or closed ending. It was just unfinished. When I returned to the story I realised that while Kate's story was finished, David's narrative needed to continue, and in doing so the two stories mirrored each other more closely. David had initially seemed sympathetic and unlike the boy in his sister's story. But David comes on to Dia, almost repeating the behaviour of the other boy. The reader is in his viewpoint, which makes the ending more disturbing.

Sometimes the process of writing a story is fluid and without effort; the story's shape develops in my mind, or while I am writing and it arrives complete and fully formed. 'The New Girl' was like this. So were Kate's sections in 'Lad Lazarus'. But David's sections in Lad Lazarus had to be worked at. Other stories are a lot more difficult. Sometimes, only after feedback, or after I have 'shelved' the story for a while, can I find the story's shape or discover what the story is about. 'Fishfinger' was shelved for a long time. Only when I returned to it did I realise what it was really about. This is a story I began a long time ago, and is based on a canal on Barton Road in Eccles. It began with the idea of two children tipping a goldfish into the canal. The goldfish is based on a fish I had as a child, that seemed to know he was dying as he jumped out of the tank, in a act of euthanasia. We saved him, but he then became gravely ill. I always saw the fish as being able to precipitate his own death. But perhaps he actually caught the fin rot in the bowl of pot pourri that he

landed in. For a while all I had was the beginning of the story: the scene of the children standing on the canal edge, a depressed goldfish, 'with one fin rusty and rotten and his sides fluffy with cotton wool disease' and the scene where they find Fishfinger in the bowl of vanilla pot pourri. For a while I was not sure what this story was about. But I like stories with pets in them, which is partly why I like Amy Hempel's work, though she principally writes about dogs.

In 'Fishfinger' I use the first person to narrate the voice of a child. This can be tricky trying to narrate. How far do I go to use the language and syntax of a child? But this story seemed to work in the first person. Her voice came through from the start, but I was not sure what the story was really about, or where it was going. I shelved the story. A couple of years later I returned to it and began to wonder about the mother who lay in bed and rarely got up and ate digestive biscuits in bed. What was wrong with her? What was going on here? I realised she was depressed and the depressed goldfish was Alice's way of understanding her mother's illness: 'Poor fishfinger, perhaps he was lonely, perhaps he was depressed,' Alice says. 'Aunt Ell had said mum was depressed, which was why we had to have the TV on very low.' In Alice's mind when people were depressed they did things like stay in bed, eating digestives or they jumped out of their tank, or locked themselves in their bedroom and took an overdose.

The fact her mother has made a suicide attempt is not stated directly in the story. The story remains within the child's perspective, but the reader, more knowing than Aliss, realises what has happened when her mother has locked her bedroom door and will not open it. This story was written before the notion of home became a conscious element in my work. But it seems to be significant in it nevertheless. Alice longs to live on a barge: 'They're much better than houses.' The setting of the canal, where they children tip the goldfish into the water is the frame for the story within the house, where their mother takes an overdose and their goldfish jumps out of the tank. The idea of living on a barge with her mum if a source of hope for Aliss:

I like to pretend I live on a barge with mum. We make coffee and inside it is cosy with a stove and lots of biscuits and sometimes I let Sam live there too – if he lets me choose the TV channel.



In this story, as recurs across the collection, home is something yearned for, something psychical, but never actual.

**Section 7:**  
**Collections of Stories:**  
**Form and Connections in *When I Get Home***

While short stories are published individually in journals and magazines, many are also published in collections, as are the majority of the stories I have discussed in this thesis. Therefore short stories are often read in a collection and as part of a greater whole. In short story criticism short stories are often discussed as if they are single entities. While critics have frequently discussed short story cycles and 'novels-in-stories' (there are for example, some illuminating essays on the form of short story cycle in *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*), less attention has been paid to analysing the collection as a form.<sup>217</sup> I would contend that not reading a short story in relation to the other stories in a collection is delimiting and reductive. The reading practice of short stories is different to novels. Therefore how a short story is read and how it relates to other stories in a collection is necessary for a more complex understanding of short fiction.

The differences between collections, short story cycles and novels-in-stories are mutable and difficult to define. Peter Donahue broaches these issues in his essay, 'The Genre Which Is Not One: Hemingway's *In Our Time*: Difference and the Short Story Cycle', and summarises many critics in saying that the short story cycle has more of a sense of unity than a collection. Hemingway's *In Our Time*, was, claims Donahue, 'more than just a haphazard gathering of the pieces that he had available for publication.'<sup>218</sup> However, while a short story cycle may have more obvious connections, this should not mean that attention is not paid to how stories work together to produce meaning in the collected form.

Issues of publication are important to a discussion of short fiction because short stories are notoriously difficult to publish. As I discussed earlier, my publication history has been with Comma Press, an independent publisher in Manchester. Only two of the stories in this collection have yet been published. 'Fishfinger' was published by a small literary journal called *Lamport Court* and 'What He Doesn't Tell Her' was commissioned by Cheshire

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<sup>217</sup> Karen Weekes, 'Postmodernism in Women's Short Story Cycles: Lorrie Moore's *Anagrams*', p.94-106, and Peter Donahue, 'The Genre Which Is Not One: Hemingway's *In Our Time*: Difference and the Short Story Cycle, p.161-172.

<sup>218</sup> Peter Donahue, p.163.



County Council, so a version of the story is posted on their website.<sup>219</sup> As a practising short story writer, I am very aware that issues of form are tied up with issues of publication and marketing. Collections are often published as novels-in-stories in order to market them. For example, Lorrie Moore's *Anagrams* was sold as a novel, but is discussed as a short story cycle in *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*. David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten: A Novel in Nine Parts* could be described as a short story cycle or a collection. Linked through incident, motif and character, these stories are situated all over world and are written in different genres.<sup>220</sup> The seven stories in Pat Barker's novel *Union Street* are all set on the same street and subtly interconnect.<sup>221</sup> The back cover of Margaret Atwood's *Moral Trouble* states the book 'could be seen as a collection of eleven stories that is almost a novel... or a novel broken up into eleven stories.' The stories span the narrator's life and are tied together by the beginning piece: 'The Bad News', which is the most incomplete story in the book.<sup>222</sup> *A View From Castle Rock* works similarly, but it also includes stories from Alice Munro's family history. The stories in Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* follow the principal character's journey through addiction and alcoholism to recovery.<sup>223</sup>

While some collections of stories have varied subject matters, many collections are linked through theme. For example, the stories in Colm Toibin's *Mothers and Sons* all focus on the relationships between mothers and sons.<sup>224</sup> *How to Breathe Under Water* explores adolescence, but the recurring images of water, swimming and lakes hold the stories together. Similarly, Lorrie Moore's first collection *Self-Help* uses the notion of self help manuals as a linking device. Not all of the stories use the second person and imperative tense to parody the self-help manual. Many are written in the first person, but enough of the stories use this technique to make the collection cohere as a whole. In *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* there are two series of stories interspersed with the other stories.<sup>225</sup> ('Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders' and 'Brief Interviews With Hideous Men'.) Place is a common linking device in early collections and short story

<sup>219</sup> <<http://www.cheshire.gov.uk/ReadersAndWriters/Readers/WBD09story.htm>> [last accessed 13.01.2010]

<sup>220</sup> David Mitchell, *Ghostwritten: A Novel In Nine Parts* (London: Sceptre, 1999).

<sup>221</sup> Pat Barker, *Union Street* (London: Virago, 1982).

<sup>222</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Moral Trouble* (London, Bloomsbury, 2006).

<sup>223</sup> Denis Johnson, *Jesus' Son* (London: Methuen, 2004).

<sup>224</sup> Colm Toibin, *Mothers and Sons* (London: Picador, 2007).

<sup>225</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001).



cycles, such as *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*. What we can see from the above list is that the form of a collection is multiple and varied.

As I have discussed, for a while I wanted to write a novel-in-stories. Some of the stories in *When I Get Home* have developed from this premise, but I found trying to fit the stories into this tight framework was very difficult. Through the drafting process a number of the stories became linked by place and character, so that many of the stories came to be set in the same area of Salford. At first they were set in an unnamed geographical location, which resembled areas of Manchester. While writing I realised that 'To Basra' and other stories were in fact set in the area where I grew up in Salford. So I added a lot more specific detail about place and setting. Frederic Forsyth prides himself on the factual accuracy of his novels, including detailed historical, geographical and knowledge. He states: 'When I say there are five steps leading up to a restaurant there are exactly five steps.'<sup>226</sup> I do not go as far as his claim. There are places, roads in Salford and other cities around the world in my stories, but they are not replicated as faithfully as Forsyth's. In my mind, they nearly slot into a map of Salford, but not exactly.

I would argue that the links between the stories do not make the collection a potential 'novel- in-stories' because the links are not patterned and do not tie all of the stories together. They do not emphasise unity (Although, as I have mentioned, these definitions of form are changeable and are often determined by marketing strategies.) The links between the stories in my collection are not neat and symmetrical; they are incidental or accidental. The character in 'To Basra' sees Hanna from 'Lebensborn' in the window. The boy that Phil meets is from down Duchy Road, where 'Down Duchy Road' is set. The park in 'To Basra' is the same park in 'Lad Lazarus'. The stories are also linked by time, as a number of the stories converge on the same Sunday. The fire in 'Lebensborn' is the fire in '33 Bullets.' While compiling the stories I wondered whether there might be a problem in that not all of the stories fall into this pattern. This led to issues about story order and whether I should place all the stories that converge in a group. This would mean that the collection was divided and not whole, so I mixed up the stories and placed the three stories with the most links at the beginning, middle and end: 'To Basra', 'Lebensborn' and '33 Bullets' respectively, as a kind of overarching framework. I tried to think about how one story led

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<sup>226</sup> Alison Gibbs, 'Frederic Forsyth', in *Writers on Writing* (London: Robert Hale, 1995), pp.48-70, p.56.



to another and to vary tone and narrative techniques, so that, for example, all the first person stories were not together in a group. I decided that the fact that all the stories did not fit into this pattern was not a problem; I did not want a neat, unified form, in which the pieces all fitted together.

The varying representations of the themes of home, war and childhood are connected by the repetition of images, motifs and scenarios across the collection. As I explained about the geographical and character links, this was not entirely planned, especially in the earlier stories. While in some stories I planned to write a story that contrasted with the others; (The Biography and The New Girl are examples), for others, the repetition of images and motifs was not so conscious. If I was not careful, this repetition could turn into a mere lazy replication of ideas, so in the drafting process I tried to make sure the stories were not mere rewrites. For example, one of the key motifs is the idea of 'homecoming'. I had not planned this to come into the story 'What He Doesn't Tell Her', but it becomes a key scene in Japhet's life. However, I consciously planned to rework the idea of homecoming in 'To Basra', which, as I have discussed, was a rewriting of the homecoming in Hemingway's 'Soldier's Home' and of the themes in my other stories.

These connections are not novelistic in that they are not essential to plot; they are not part of a narrative structure of cause and effect. They do not reveal or explain hidden parts of the narrative; they do not make sense of the whole work. The stories do not 'fit' together as if they are mechanical parts. They are not unified. In this collection, though I wanted some kind of connection between the stories, I aimed to maintain the messiness and heterogeneity of a collection of stories, which holds the stories in tension with each other, while keeping them separate. The heterogeneity avoids conglomeration and emphasises diversity, rather than a modernist unity. What the links do is draw attention to the thematic connections between the stories. They map out a fictional world which is bigger than the individual stories, and they suggest the ellipses and spaces between the stories. I have developed this narrative method because I wanted to draw connections between experiences of war and oppression, and emphasise one's own capacity for violence and cruelty. While my earlier stories focused on the experience of victims of oppression and persecution and people who suffer the effects of war, in my more recent stories I have attempted to portray characters who are in some ways complicit and involved in acts of



violence or persecution. By juxtaposing these different stories, and not placing them within a hierarchy, I try to open up the reading experience. The reader does not solely empathise with the victims, but also with those who are implicated. There is not one character for the reader to identify with; one single point of view is not privileged. Instead, there is also multiplicity of voice and point of view. A collection is a cacophony of voices. A collection holds the stories near to each other; they dangle in proximity, perhaps touching, but separate and shining light on each other. There is an oscillation between the unity of the collection and the heterogeneity and the specificity of each story. While this pull is more evident in short story cycles and novels in stories, I would contend that this also occurs in a collection. This oscillation offers a different kind of reading experience, where the reader makes connections and comparisons. While reading a novel necessitates a linear reading, reading a collection does not require that a reader starts at the beginning of the book. The reader does not have to respect the writer's ordering of the stories. She can dip in and out of the collection, reading whatever she chooses. This means that the writer does not have as much control over the reading experience; a writer cannot depend on a reader reading from A to B. The reading process of a short story collection is in some ways democratic. A collection does not privilege one point of view and there is a levelling of the hierarchy of author, character, and reader.

While writing this collection and commentary, what I have discovered and subsequently tried to highlight is that short stories are not isolated texts that exist alone in the universe. For me, this is evident in the process of writing: stories produce stories. A story asks questions that it does not always answer, or offers a question about another point of view, another reaction. This openness, or incompleteness of short stories generates more stories, and therefore more perspectives and views on the same issues or topics. This openness in the form, this process of writing that means the text is never utterly complete or finished goes beyond the idea of an open ending. Though the short story always has its end in sight, as a form it is never closed because it is a partial form. In a short story collection there is a profusion of meaning. A collection of stories is essentially contradictory; it emphasises multiplicity and multivalence. This is the power of its politics.



## Conclusion

### Form and Politics in *When I Get Home*

If the short story is alive while the novel is dead, the reason must lie in approach and method. The short story as a form and as a kind of creative vision must be better equipped to attempt the capture of ultimate reality.<sup>227</sup>

I did not set out with an agenda and aesthetics before writing *When I Get Home* or the critical commentary. While I had certain themes and interests in mind for the stories and I wrote the stories alongside my research into the home and short story theory, my stances on issues in the commentary have developed through the writing of the stories. Therefore, in the commentary I have tried to emphasise the process of writing the collection and how an aesthetics and ethics of writing has developed through the writing and drafting of the stories, which in turn has been informed by my reading fiction and theory. The emphasis on process instead of the finished product is in some ways anathema to critical writing, which requires a thesis and an argument. So while this approach might seem contradictory, I have developed this method in order to emphasise that one overriding argument or theory cannot explain every instance of literature. Literature always squirms out of theoretical boxes, even those made by the writer herself.

In mapping out the debates in short story theory in chapter one, I set up the parameters and the basis for the discussion in the following chapters. I surveyed theories on forms of short stories and discussed how useful these are for the practice of writing short stories. While I choose not to write with a conscious ideology or theory in mind, research into critical and creative writing has developed this collection. I argued that definitions of the short story as a genre were delimiting because they were caught up in comparisons with the novel that focused on length and size, whereas approaches that focused on the forms of the short story were more productive. These investigations into form analysed narrative structure and showed how the short story has reduced and fragmented the traditional 'epical' structure of beginning, middle and end. More truncated than the traditional story, the modern short story tends to focus on the internal feelings of the character rather than outward action. The

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<sup>227</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Flash of Fireflies', in *The New Short Story Theories* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), p.265.

postmodern story plays with the short story form in various ways; showing its artifice and fictionality, fragmenting the structure and using surrealism and the grotesque.

In thinking about the relationship between short story theory, literary theory and politics, I have tried to avoid placing the forms of the short story in a hierarchy by claiming that the lyrical or postmodern short story is more progressive than traditional short stories. Instead, I have emphasised the need to attend to the specifics of each story, accounting for the cultural circumstances surrounding each text. In relation to my own writing, I emphasised how the writing of each new story demanded a new engagement with form and politics, one that was true to the themes and issues that arose in the writing. In emphasising the process of writing and drafting the stories, I demonstrated that when I reused the form and structure of stories I had previously written, the stories became stale and repetitive. So I contended that each new story produces its own politics in the act of writing.

These debates around the form of the short story informed my interest in the issues surrounding the ethics of voice appropriation, and the representation of war and persecution. In some stories a more fragmented, postmodern form was called, while in others a more traditional form was appropriate. I outlined why, when given the risks associated with voice appropriation I still chose to write about characters from different ethnic backgrounds to myself, and how in order to do this, I used traditional forms and more postmodern techniques. I have not rejected a notion of 'realism'; the characters are rounded, believable and knowable in a recognisable world, and the reader can identify and sympathise with them. However, in two of the stories it seemed important to foreground my position as a white woman writer, in 'What He Doesn't Tell Her', I used two viewpoints and a fragmented approach in 'The War Tour' and '33 Bullets'. These techniques were important for breaking the illusion of unmediated access to the character's world, signalling my partiality and minimising voice appropriation, while not relinquishing the gains of more traditional fiction. In the stories where I wrote about violence and complicity I chose to return to a more traditional 'epical' form, so the reader identifies with the first person narrator, but is led by the story till they are embroiled in violence.

Section four and five emphasised the importance of the home in *When I Get Home*. I contested the ongoing dismissal of women's writing about the domestic, and attempted to



blur the separation of the private and public spheres that Virginia Woolf highlights in her comment that writing about the battlefield is perceived as being more important than writing that focuses on the 'feelings of a woman in a drawing room'. By analysing how women writers have explored the effects, the psychological trauma and aftermath of war, I contested the belief that war happens far from the home, and showed its impact on domestic space. In so doing I have tried to reconceptualise our relationship to war as not being an event that happens 'elsewhere' and therefore out of our control, but something we are all implicated in.

In section six I examined the issues of writing the self in stories about childhood. I considered the gap between the narrating, speaking self and the narrated, childhood self who sees in the text. I analysed writers who interrogate the process of writing the self and foreground how writing the self is a fiction-making process by distancing the gap between these two 'selves' in the text. I discussed how I had used autobiographical and personal material in the stories and looked at the interplay of memory, imagination and form in my writing. I showed how in 'The New Girl' I widened the gap between the adult and childhood self to interrogate how the adult self constructs childhood memories. In 'Down Duchy Road', however, I tried to minimise the distance between the narrating adult who speaks and the childhood self who sees in the story in order to minimise narratorial and cultural comment in the depiction of religious groups.

Most of the discussion in the thesis focused on individual stories. However, I would contend that analysis of short stories is limited by solely considering them as individual texts. How stories relate to each other in a collection or anthology creates a different reading practice and a different kind of criticism. The various stories in a collection are held in tension with each other; there is an oscillation between the unity of the collection and the heterogeneity and the specificity of each story. The meaning of each story is both produced by its own internal mechanics and by how it relates and differs from the other stories. Short stories in a collection are in dialogue and implicitly comment on each other. Therefore meaning and themes of a collection of stories have a cumulative effect, but do not unify or coalesce. By juxtaposing the experiences of refugees, characters from different eras and nationalities with more personal stories about childhood, and linking them by setting them in the same geographical location, I have explored and linked contrasting

experiences of war and persecution and exposed one's own capacity for violence and cruelty.

Critically, more research is needed into the collection of stories as a form. This thesis only points in this direction. In my own work I would like to use more postmodern forms to explore political realities, and experiment further with metafiction, the surreal and the macabre, as well as using further elements of genre fiction in order to take the portrayal of one's complicity in violence further, and to explore the attendant issue of racism in more depth. In this thesis I have tried to demonstrate the importance of the short story, both as a piece of art and as a subtle tool that engages with the world, and I have emphasised the potential of the collection to create a different kind of reading practice that democratically emphasises heterogeneity and multivalence. I have maintained that politics is not necessarily tied to artistic form. With each new story, the writing process produces a new politics.



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